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DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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EC mulls linking voter ID, Aadhaar card

Amid allegations of duplicate voter IDs, CEC Kumar will meet govt officials to discuss issue

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar has convened a meeting with the Union home secretary and the legislative secretary to discuss the issue of linking voter identity cards with Aadhaar amid allegations of fudging of electoral rolls data.

Flagging cases of duplicate voter card numbers allocated to electors in different states, opposition party Trinamool Congress has alleged that the poll authority was fudging voters' list to help the BJP.

Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi had also echoed similar sentiments in the Lok Sabha recently.

Describing duplicate card numbers as a "legacy issue", Election Commission has assured to settle the matter in the next three months. It has maintained that duplicate numbers for not necessarily mean fake voters.

Sources said Kumar will discuss the issue with the home secretary, legislative secretary and CEO of UIDAI on Tuesday.

The law allows voluntary seeding of voter rolls with the Aadhaar database

The government has told Parliament that the Aadhaar-voter card seeding exercise was "process driven" and no target or timelines have been given for the proposed linking.

The government has also asserted that the names of those who do not link their Aadhaar details with the voters' list will not be struck off the electoral rolls.

Section 23 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950, as amended by the Election Laws (Amendment) Act, 2021, provides for the electoral registration officers to require the existing or prospective elector to provide the Aadhaar number for establishing identity on a voluntary basis.

Meanwhile, Trinamool Congress said the meeting convened by the Chief Election Commissioner to discuss voter identity card and Aadhaar seeding is a "face-saving measure".

Sagarika Ghose, deputy leader of Trinamool Congress (TMC) in Rajya Sabha, said the statements issued by the poll panel earlier over the duplicate EPIC numbers and this meeting being called now, are "face-saving measures".

She added that the TMC will keep a strict vigil till the next state elections. *—PTI*

Describing duplicate card numbers as a legacy issue, EC has assured to settle the matter in the next three months. ***PHOTO: PTI***

Whitewashing of Sambhal's Mosque to begin today

SAMBHAL, 15 MARCH

The whitewashing of the outer wall of the Shahi Jama Masjid in Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal is set to begin, following a directive from the Allahabad High Court. Masood Farooqui, the mosque's secretary, confirmed that an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) team visited the mosque to assess labour and materials. The High Court instructed the ASI to complete the work within a week, allowing only four days for execution. Recent tensions in Sambhal, stemming from riots after a survey of the mosque last November, have raised sensitivity around the project. *—PTI*

Police file case over open namaz at Meerut varsity

MEERUT, 15 MARCH

Police have filed a case following the open offering of namaz at IIMT University during Holi celebrations, after a video of the incident circulated on social media. Ganga Nagar Station House Officer Anoop Singh confirmed that the case was lodged based on a complaint by Kartik Hindu. University spokesperson Sunil Sharma stated that an internal investigation revealed the video was intended to disrupt communal harmony. Consequently, the university has sought police action against student Khalid Pradhan, who uploaded the footage. Charges have been filed under Section 299 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and relevant provisions of the Information Technology Act. Local Hindu groups have called for arrests, citing the significant number of participants and the timing of the video's release. *—PTI*

Smoke rises from charred remains of a shop after at least three establishments were allegedly torched during a clash between two groups amid a Holi procession in Jharkhand's Giridih ***PHOTO: PTI***

22 arrested after communal clashes in Jharkhand on Holi

RANCHI, 15 MARCH

Twenty-two people were arrested for allegedly being involved in a clash during a Holi procession in Jharkhand's Giridih, police said on Saturday.

Several people were injured, and many shops and vehicles torched after the clash broke out between Muslims and Hindus during the procession on Friday in the Ghorthamba.

According to media reports, the incident took place when a Holi procession was passing through a Ghorthambha Chowk. The residents, who belonged to the other community, objected to the procession being taken through the area as there was a mosque nearby. They claimed that Hindus, who were taking out the procession, forcefully entered the lane with the mosque.

The altercation between the two communities turned violent when the particular community started pelting stones. Soon, both sides started pelting stones at each other.

Khorimahua sub-divisional police officer (SDPO) Rajendra Prasad said four makeshift shops, five motorcycles and two four-wheelers were torched during the clash.

Earlier, Giridih SP Bimal Kumar had said that a manhunt was launched to nab those involved in the clash.

Police personnel in large numbers have also been deployed to maintain peace in the area, he said.

Jharkhand BJP chief and Leader of Opposition in the assembly Babulal Marandi blamed the JMM-led government for the incident.

Union Minister Annapurna Devi claimed that the situation worsened due to a lack of vigilance by the local administration. *—PTI*

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Religious discrimination affects all faiths: India

UNITED NATIONS, 15 MARCH

India has said it stands united with the UN members in condemning incidents of religious intolerance against Muslims, as it underlined the need to recognise that religious discrimination is a broader challenge affecting followers of all faiths.

"We stand united with the UN membership in condemning incidents of religious intolerance against Muslims. However, it is also imperative to recognise that religious discrimination is a broader challenge that affects followers of all faiths," the Indian envoy said.

Addressing the informal meeting of the plenary in the UN General Assembly to commemorate the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, India's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador P Harish said that fostering a world free from religious discrimination, hatred and violence has been a way of life for India since time immemorial.

"We strongly believe that the path to meaningful progress lies in acknowledging that religio-phobia in its various forms threatens the fabric of our diverse, global society," he added.

India voiced concern over the disturbing rise in violence targeting places of worship and religious communities. Harish said this can only be countered by sustained commitment and concrete action from all Member States to the principle of equal respect for all faiths.

The UN General Assembly had adopted a resolution sponsored by 60 member-states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) designating 15 March as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. *—PTI*

UN Ambassador P Harish ***PHOTO: X***

- India voiced concern over the disturbing rise in violence targeting places of worship.

2 INDIAN MINISTERS IN CANADA CABINET

OTTAWA, 15 MARCH

Indo-Canadian Anita Anand and Delhi-born Kamal Khera, one of the youngest women ever elected to the Canadian Parliament, are part of new Prime Minister Mark Carney's cabinet.

Liberal Party's Carney, a former central banker, was sworn in alongside members of the 30th Canadian Ministry on Friday at a ceremony presided over by Governor General Mary Simon here.

Anand, 58, is the Minister of Innovation, Science and Industry while Khera, 36, is Minister of Health, both among the few retaining their ministerial posts, albeit with different portfolios, from former prime minister Justin Trudeau's cabinet.

Delhi-born Khera's family shifted to Canada when she was still in school. She later earned her Bachelor of Science degree from York University, Toronto and is a registered nurse and a political activist. *—PTI*

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8 killed in Israeli airstrikes on Gaza: Palestine medics

CAIRO, 15 MARCH

Palestinian medics have reported that Israeli airstrikes in the Gaza Strip have resulted in the deaths of at least eight individuals, one of whom was a local reporter operating a drone. The Indonesian Hospital confirmed it received the bodies following two separate airstrikes in the northern town of Beit Lahiya on Saturday. Fares Awad, the head of emergency services in northern Gaza, identified the deceased reporter as Mahmoud Islim. The ongoing conflict continues to raise concerns about civilian casualties as hostilities escalate in the region. *—PTI*

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Ranya's stepdad DGP Ramachandra sent on leave

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

Director General of Police (ADGP) Ramachandra Rao, the stepfather of Kannada actress Ranya Rao, has been sent on "compulsory leave" on Saturday, from his position as Chairman and Managing Director of the Karnataka State Police Housing and Infrastructure Development Corporation Limited.

He is being replaced by Additional Director General of Police K.V. Sharath Chandra, an IPS officer from the 1997 batch, until further notice.

This decision comes after ADGP Rao's alleged involvement in a gold smuggling case. His stepdaughter, Ranya Rao, was arrested on 3 March at Bengaluru Airport with 14.2 kg of gold worth Rs 12.56 crore while returning from Dubai. Investigating officers were informed by the protocol officer assisting Ranya that he followed direct instructions reportedly from Rao. DRI, handling the case, revealed that the investigation uncovered a "complex method" of smuggling. The process involved using the State Police Protocol Officer to bypass security, transferring funds through hawala transactions, and a wider criminal syndicate. In response to his daughter's arrest, Rao expressed shock and distress. He claimed he was unaware of her involvement in smuggling. *—Salar News*

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FAKE JOB PROMISE

Officials dupe pourakarmikas of Rs 5,000

HAMEED ASHRAF
BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

SALAR EXCLUSIVE

In yet glaring case of alleged exploitation of Bengaluru's civic workers, several contract-based Pourakarmikas have accused government officials of taking money from them, promising "permanent government jobs".

The pourakarmikas, who have long been demanding regularisation of their employment, claim that officials have collected Rs 5,000 per worker, promising them confirmation letters of permanent employment from Chief Minister Siddaramaiah.

They alleged that one M Narayan of the Karnataka State Safai Karamchari Commission and a few supervisors have collected money from these workers in several Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) wards.

Karmika Samrakshana Trade Union (a pro-pourakarmika association) President Thyagaraj told Salar News that thousands of pourakarmikas have fallen victim to this fraud and lost lakhs of rupees. "We have been protesting for their job security, but instead of addressing our concerns, officials are taking advantage of our desperation," he said.

One of the workers, who did not wish to reveal her name for fear of repercussions, said, "I paid Rs 5,000 after my supervisor assured me that my job would be made permanent in a month. Now, they are ignoring our calls. If we question them, they threaten to remove our names from the list."

Manjunath, a 38-year-old from Shivajinagar, echoed similar sentiments. "I borrowed money to pay them for getting a permanent job. If they do not return our money, we will have no choice but to approach the Lokayukta."

This is not the first time Pourakarmikas in Bengaluru have been deceived. In 2017, several workers alleged that contractors made them sign blank papers under the pretext of job regularisation. They later found out that the documents were converted as their consent to continue as contract employees. They said that the Koramangala police refused to act on their complaints. The victims are now preparing to file a formal complaint with the Lokayukta.

Denying his involvement in the matter, Narayan told Salar News, "I was told that a few people had collected money using my name. I'm not sure who these people are. I will speak to Pourakarmikas and the contractors and get more details on this.".

He further said that he will help the civic workers, who have lost their money, in filing a complaint with the police. The BBMP officials, on the other hand, maintained they were unaware of this. *—Salar News*

- This is not the first time Pourakarmikas in Bengaluru have been deceived.

Explosion targets temple in Amritsar

AMRITSAR, 15 MARCH

A blast occurred outside a temple in Amritsar around midnight when an unidentified attacker who came on a motorcycle hurled an explosive device towards the building, damaging a portion of its wall and shattering window panes, officials said on Saturday.

Amritsar Police Commissioner Gurpreet Singh Bhullar said the police were informed about the incident at around 2 am on Saturday by the temple priest and the CCTV footage showed two unidentified persons hurling an explosive device towards the temple and fleeing away.

Bhullar said the Police suspected the role of Pakistan's spy agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in the attack on Thakur Dwar temple and vowed to apprehend the culprits soon.

There have been many incidents of explosions targeting police posts in Amritsar and Gurdaspur in the past four months but this is the first such attack on a temple. While no one was hurt in the incident, which was captured on CCTV, the explosion caused panic among residents in the Khandwala area of Amritsar.

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann said the Amritsar incident was a handiwork of fissiparous forces that wanted to destabilise the peace but they will never succeed in their design.

Opposition parties alleged that it was proof of the "collapse" of the law and order under the AAP government. The BJP sought a CBI probe into the incident while Congress leader Partap Bajwa demanded the resignation of CM Mann who holds Home portfolio. *—PTI*

A CCTV screenshot shows a deserted street at night after loud blasts were heard on Thakur Sher Shah Suri Road, in Amritsar ***PHOTO: PTI***

Cops shoot dacoits in Hubballi after assault on officers

HUBBALLI, 15 MARCH

In Hubballi early on Saturday, police opened fire on two dacoits, injuring them in the legs, as the suspects allegedly attacked officers during transport to a sub-division police station. The individuals, identified as Irshad and Akbar, were reportedly involved in a burglary at the residence of Basavaraj Horatti, Chairman of the Karnataka Legislative Council, where cash and jewellery were stolen last week. Three police personnel, including Sub Inspector Devendra, sustained injuries in the scuffle and were admitted to the government hospital at the Karnataka Institute of Medical Sciences. *—Salar News*

3 escape after lorry topples onto car

BELAGAVI, 15 MARCH

Three individuals had a miraculous escape when a cement concrete lorry fell onto their vehicle while they were waiting on the service road of the Pune-Bengaluru national highway, near KLES Prabhakar Kore Hospital. The incident occurred on Saturday morning as Parappa Balikayi, Ningappa Koppad, and another person were inside their car, registration KA25 MD 6506, awaiting relatives arriving from Dharwad for a family function. The lorry's weight completely crushed the car, but the three occupants were rescued within 15 minutes after cranes lifted the fallen truck.

Witnesses and police personnel remarked that it was a remarkable escape, considering the car's obliterated state, with the three suffering only minor injuries. The APMC police have registered a case, and the injured have been admitted to the civil hospital in Belagavi. *—Salar News*

Forest fire destroys 25 acres of woodland

MYSURU, 15 MARCH

A forest fire engulfed the Gavin Ranganathaswamy Hills in Kollegal taluk, Mysuru, on Friday evening, destroying approximately 25 acres of woodland. Fortunately, no wild animals were reported lost. The blaze spread rapidly due to strong winds and rising temperatures of 33 degrees Celsius. Bharat, the buffer zone range forest officer, coordinated firefighting efforts alongside local firefighters to extinguish the flames.

Investigations revealed that some individuals had deliberately ignited fires in two locations, coinciding with the influx of thousands of devotees for a car festival on the same day. *—Salar News*

1 killed and 2 injured in vehicles collision in Mysuru

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

A tragic multi-vehicle collision involving eight vehicles occurred on Mysuru Road in the early hours of Saturday, leaving one person dead and two others injured. The accident happened near the Satellite Bus Stand under Byatarayanapura Traffic Police jurisdiction.

According to police sources, a speeding canter truck lost control around 3.30am while travelling from Mysuru Circle toward Bapuji Nagar. The truck collided with four stationary autorickshaws, two cars, and two motorcycles before striking a pedestrian and crashing into the road divider. The deceased is 44-year-old Jagan, the canter truck driver from Tamil Nadu, who suffered severe head and limb injuries. He was taken to Victoria Hospital but succumbed to his injuries. The injured individuals, identified as 20-year-old Manoj, a pedestrian, and Chand Pasha, an autorickshaw driver, are currently receiving treatment at a nearby hospital. *—Salar News*

BJP flays 4% quota for Muslim contractors

BJP says issue extends beyond State, has nationwide implications

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has condemned the Karnataka government's recent decision to allocate 4 per cent reservation for Muslim contractors in government projects, describing it as "appeasement politics" by the Congress party. BJP MP Ravi Shankar Prasad pointed out that this issue extends beyond Karnataka and has "nationwide implications."

Prasad emphasised that the decision signals the Congress leadership's failure to learn from past electoral losses, asserting, "They are not learning their lesson even after losing multiple times." He further questioned the rationale behind extending reservation policies beyond employment into government contracts, declaring that "reservation based on religion is not permissible under the Indian Constitution."

BJP MP Ravi Shankar Prasad Prasad said the decision signals Congress' failure to learn from past electoral losses **PHOTO: PTI**

BJP leader Amit Malviya echoed Prasad's sentiments, labelling the Congress as the "New Muslim League." He reiterated that the Indian Constitution does not endorse advantages based on religion, asserting that the Congress government focuses solely on "corruption and appeasement politics."

Meanwhile, Union Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal emphasised that Prime Minister Modi promotes gratification over appeasement. The Karnataka Cabinet's amendment to the Karnataka Transparency in Public Procurement (KTPP) Act permits the reservation for Muslim contractors under a new category labelled Category-II B, in contracts up to Rs 1 crore for various government procurement activities.

The Karnataka government maintains that this decision is aimed at promoting inclusivity and ensuring equitable economic opportunities for all communities.

However, the BJP's strong condemnation indicates a deepening political divide over issuesof reservation and community-based policies as the state prepares for future electoral battles. *—PTI*

JD(S) workers protest against the government's decision on Greater Bengaluru at Freedom Park on Saturday **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

Experts explore action on unscientific infra in B'luru

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

Civic activists and experts convened at the Bengaluru Press Club on Saturday to discuss potential legal challenges against what they deem unscientific infrastructure plans proposed by the Karnataka government. The meeting, part of the 'Bengaluru Town Hall' initiative, focused on seeking urgent judicial intervention against governance decisions perceived as undemocratic.

Central to the discussion was the opposition to the Greater Bengaluru Governance (GBG) Bill, which activists argue contravenes the 74th Constitutional Amendment. Comprised of nearly 50 civic groups, the Bengaluru Town Hall aimed to develop a legal strategy to halt projects that lack sound scientific planning and do not adequately address the city's infrastructural needs.

Civic activist and actor Prakash Belawadi, who spearheaded the Bengaluru Town Hall forum, highlighted the significance of collective action in challenging such projects. "Together, we can compel the government to abandon ill-conceived plans, just as we have successfully done in the past," he asserted. Prominent figures in the civic space, including Rajkumar Dugar, Ashish Verma, and Karthiyayini Chamaraj, took part in the discussions. The meeting sought to finalise a resolution for legal proceedings, with aspirations to enlist all civic groups in Bengaluru as signatories to the litigation. *—Salar News*

RANYA ALLEGES ASSAULT

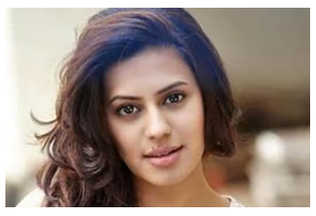
39kg gold smuggled to Dubai part of hawala network: DRI

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

Around 39 kg of gold may have been smuggled as a part of a hawala network in which state customs and government officials are involved, sources in the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence said on Saturday. Even as her bail application was rejected at a hearing on Friday, Ramya Rao claimed that she was assaulted and coerced into signing blank and typed documents.

Probing the matter are DRI and Central Bureau of Intelligence (CBI) who reiterated in Court hearing of her bail application on Friday that the investigation had unearthed a sophisticated methodology for smuggling gold, bypassing scanners by using State Protocol officer, to transfer funds from Dubai to India through Mumbai and Bengaluru airports showing the involvement of a large syndicate. The court then denied bail on hearing that the accused had not cooperated in the investigation.

Meanwhile Ramya denied her involvement in the case. In a



letter addressed to the DRI's Additional Director General in Bengaluru on 6 March, she said "Your officers did not allow me to explain my innocence." Ramya recounted that during her detention, she was slapped 10 to 15 times and despite the physical abuse, she refused to sign the statements provided by the officials. Furthermore, she alleged that she was pressured to sign 50 to 60 typed pages and around 40 blank sheets. "One officer warned me, 'If you don't sign, we will expose your father's identity, even though we know he is not involved,'" said Rao who is the stepdaughter of K Ramachandra Rao, a senior officer currently serving as the Managing Director of the Karnataka State Police Housing and Infrastructure Corp. *—Salar News*

JEWELLERY BUSINESSMEN UNDER ED SCANNER

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has escalated its investigation into a gold smuggling operation following the recent arrest of actress Ranya Rao at Kempegowda International Airport. She was apprehended by the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) and the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) for allegedly possessing smuggled gold, prompting authorities to delve deeper into the case.

As part of the inquiry, two prominent jewellery traders from Bengaluru are currently facing intense questioning. Sources reveal that ED officials conducted a series of raids across the city, recovering unaccounted gold from the residences of various jewellers. *—Salar News*

BJP RETAINS MAYOR, DY MAYOR SEATS IN BELAGAVI

BELAGAVI, 15 MARCH

Mangesh Pawar and Vani Joshi have been elected unopposed as mayor and deputy mayor, respectively, of the Belagavi City Corporation. Pawar represents ward No. 41, while Joshi is from ward No. 44. The elections saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secure all 37 seats without contest, as the Congress party, holding 21 seats in the 58-member body, chose not to nominate candidates. The mayor's position was reserved for the general category, while the deputy mayor's role was designated for women. *—Salar News*

ISRO COMPLETES TESTING OF ENGINE FOR LVM3 MISSION

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) announced on Saturday the successful completion of flight acceptance hot testing for the cryogenic engine designated for the sixth operational mission of the LVM3 launch vehicle (LVM-M6). The testing took place at the ISRO Propulsion Complex in Mahendragiri, Tamil Nadu.

The LVM3, a three-stage medium-lift launch vehicle, is a significant advancement by ISRO. Typically, cryogenic engines undergo hot testing to validate their readiness for flight, and the CE20 engine used in the Cryogenic Upper Stage of the LVM3 has been subjected to such tests at the High-Altitude Test (HAT) facility. *—PTI*

KPCC MEETING

Minister KJ George, DyCM DK Shivakumar, former minister Vinay Kumar Sorake, Rajya Sabha MP GC Chandrashekhar and AICC Secretary Mansoor Ali Khan attend the KPCC office bearers' meeting at the party office in Bengaluru on Saturday. **PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD**

Fire erupts in B'luru godown, arson suspected

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

A significant fire broke out at a centring godown on Ullal Main Road late on Friday night, resulting in the destruction of materials valued at several lakhs of rupees.

Officials reported that firefighters worked for nearly six hours to bring the blaze under control, which erupted around 11.30 pm in the godown where construction centring materials were stored. Six fire engines were dispatched to the scene, with emergency crews labouring throughout the night to extinguish the flames. A Tata Ace goods vehicle parked inside the premises was also engulfed by the fire. Authorities suspect that miscreants, possibly under the influence of alcohol, may have deliberately started the blaze. Witnesses noted that the godown owner locked up and left for home at 7.30pm, after which the fire is believed to have ignited. *—Salar News*

A case has been filed at the Jnanabharathi police station, and an investigation is ongoing to ascertain the cause of the fire **PHOTO: SALAR**

Minister orders capture of jumbos after deaths

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

In light of increasing human-elephant conflicts in Bikkodu, Arehalli, and nearby areas of Belur taluk, Karnataka's Forest, Ecology, and Environment Minister Eshwar B Khandre has ordered the immediate capture of three aggressive elephants troubling local residents.

Following a tragic incident where a woman was killed in an elephant attack on 14 March, Khandre convened an emergency meeting with forest officials at Vikas Soudha. He announced the establishment of an Elephant Task Force (ETF) office in the region, along with the appointment of a Deputy Conservator of Forests to oversee the initiative. To enhance monitoring of elephant movements, Khandre directed the acquisition of two thermal camera-equipped drones for round-the-clock surveillance in the Hassan range. He also mandated the deployment of two additional jeeps and more personnel for emergency response teams to ensure swift actions based on alerts about elephant activity. *—PTI*

ASSEMBLY INFORMED

Teachers' shortage hits Aurad schools

BIDAR, 15 MARCH

MLA Prabhu B Chavan has voiced serious concerns regarding the shortage of Kannada teachers in the schools of the Aurad (B) Assembly constituency during a recent legislative assembly session. In response to his questions, Minister for School Education and Literacy, S. Madhu Bangarappa, revealed that 18 primary and 22 high schools in the area are experiencing a significant deficiency of teachers.

In an interim measure, guest teachers have been appointed to fill some of these vacancies. Furthermore, the government has approved the recruitment of 4,882 primary school teachers and 385 high school teachers across the Kalyana Karnataka region. However, following a Cabinet decision on 28 October, 2024, all new notifications for direct recruitment in reserved categories under the Karnataka State Civil Services have been placed on hold, preventing further recruitment.

Chavan, who has made education and the preservation of the Kannada language his priorities, stressed the need for equitable distribution of teachers, as some schools with fewer students are overstaffed while others lack adequate faculty. He called for immediate government action to address these discrepancies, ensure quality education, and provide students the opportunity to excel in a competitive world.

The MLA urged that special attention be given to schools in border regions to rectify ongoing challenges, particularly the critical teacher shortages impacting local education. *—Salar News*

Guest teachers have been appointed to fill some of vacancies **PHOTO: PTI**

HC bins election dispute against Bidar South MLA

BIDAR, 15 MARCH

High Court's special bench has dismissed an election dispute petition filed against Shailendra Beldale, the MLA of Bidar South, following his victory in the 2023 Assembly elections. The petition, filed by Rajkumar Madaki, alleged that Beldale had provided false information in his affidavit, claiming to be a resident of Chittawadi, which Madaki argued constituted a criminal offense.

However, the court ruled on 7 March that Madaki's petition lacked merit and was politically motivated. It pointed out that Madaki was not a contestant in the election, and his allegations were unsubstantiated. The court also highlighted that the Election Commission had already accepted Beldale's nomination papers after verifying his documents relating to residence and property ownership in Chittawadi.

Beldale's lawyer, Gaurish Khashempur, argued for the dismissal of the petition, stating, "The losing candidate did not file the complaint directly but through another person." Gaurish Khashempur, Advocate for Beldale, told Salar News that the allegations had been proven false at all stages of the legal proceedings. *—Salar News*

Man issues online death threats to MP minister; held

KHANDWA, 15 MARCH

A man has been arrested in Madhya Pradesh's Khandwa district for allegedly issuing death threats to a senior cabinet Minister, police said on Saturday. Khandwa's Superintendent of Police, Manoj Kumar Rai, said a message was posted on WhatsApp on 13 March, which contained abusive language and death threats against Minister for Tribal Affairs Kunwar Vijay Shah. Investigation revealed that Mukesh Darbar, a resident under Harsud police station limits, had posted the message, he said. The official said the accused also allegedly called the minister's supporters over the phone and verbally abused them. *—PTI*

Tikait escapes unhurt in car crash in Muzaffarnagar

MUZAFFARNAGAR, 15 MARCH

Rakesh Tikait, the national spokesperson of the Bharatiya Kisan Union, narrowly escaped injury in a road accident in Muzaffarnagar district. A nilgai collided with the front of his vehicle near the Meerpur bypass road. Tikait reported that the nilgai suddenly appeared on the road and struck his car. Fortunately, he was wearing a seatbelt and escaped unhurt. However, his gunman sustained minor injuries. Tikait stressed the importance of wearing seatbelts, citing the extra security it provided during the accident. He also cautioned drivers against speeding, highlighting the rapid movement of wild animals. Uttar Pradesh minister Kapil Dev Agarwal and Muzaffarnagar MP Harendra Singh Malik visited Tikait's residence to check on his well-being following the incident. *—PTI*

Assam Cong Spokesperson held for online post

GUWAHATI/NORTH LAKHIMPUR, 15 MARCH

Assam Congress Spokesperson Reetam Singh on Saturday was arrested for a social media post enquiring about the status of cases registered against three senior BJP leaders, including a former state Chief and two serving MLAs. He was arrested from his home in Guwahati by a team of Lakhimpur district police with assistance from the Guwahati Police, after a complaint was made by the wife of BJP MLA Manab Deka. Singh made a post on X on 13 March with a news report about three individuals being convicted by a court for a rape case in the Dhemaji district in 2021. He shared a few photographs, on X, of a strong posse of policemen outside his home and claimed that they came to arrest him without warrant and notice. *—PTI*

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Shinde wanted to join Congress in past, says Raut

MUMBAI, 15 MARCH

Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Sanjay Raut claimed on Saturday that former Maharashtra chief minister and Shiv Sena head Eknath Shinde wanted to join the Congress in the past. Though Raut didn't mention the year or month when Shinde, who split the undivided Shiv Sena in June 2022, apparently planned the switch, he invoked the late Congress leader Ahmed Patel. "I know what all was going on. Ahmed Patel is not around now and hence I don't want to say anything more because he is not there to substantiate this," Raut told reporters. Patel died on 25 November, 2020. When probed further, Raut said, "Ask (senior Congress leader and ex-chief minister) Prithviraj Chavan about it". Chavan has declined to comment. Shinde was not immediately available for his reaction. *—PTI*

Cong didn't allow peace in Assam; PM restored it: Shah

Home Minister said during Cong rule he spent 7-days in Assam jail

DERGAON, 15 MARCH

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday alleged that the Congress did not allow peace to prevail in Assam, but PM Narendra Modi restored it, developed infrastructure and ensured employment for the youth of the northeastern state.

Shah was speaking after inaugurating the first phase of the revamped Lachit Barphukan Police Academy at Dergaon in Golaghat district. He also laid the foundation for the second phase.

"Over 10,000 youths have laid down arms and joined the mainstream in Assam, with peace returning to the state during the last 10 years. Assam, which was known for agitation, violence and insurgency, now has the most modern semiconductor industry. An amount of Rs 27,000 crore is being invested here for a semiconductor unit, which is going to change the future of Assam," he asserted.

Shah also said while investment proposals of over Rs 5 lakh crore have been received in the recently concluded Advantage Assam 2.0 business summit, infrastructure projects worth another Rs 3 lakh crore will be implemented in the state by the central government.

"These projects worth Rs 8 crore lakh will create such an environment that youths from across the country will come here for jobs," the home minister said.

Under the Narendra Modi-led government, the Bodo Peace Accord in 2020, Karbi Accord in 2021, Adivasi Peace Accord in 2022 and the peace pact with the ULFA in 2023 were signed, he said. Agreements to settle border disputes with Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh have also been signed, Shah said.

"I had faced lathicharge. It was during the government of Hiteswar Saikia (of the Congress). I have spent seven days in jail in Assam," he said.

Claiming that the situation in the state has undergone a sea-change under the BJP-led governments in the past few years, he said, "The saffron party had promised peace to the people and we have delivered it." *—PTI*

Union Home Minister Amit Shah during the inauguration of Lachit Barphukan Police Academy, in Golaghat, Assam on Saturday *PHOTO: PTI*

TN announces spl package for paddy growers

CHENNAI, 15 MARCH

Tamil Nadu government will implement a special package to increase the paddy area and food grain production during Kar, Kuruvai and Sornavari seasons, in 29 non-Cauvery Delta districts at an outlay of Rs 102 crore, Agriculture Minister MRK Panneerslvam informed the Assembly on Saturday.

These cultivation seasons begin in the months of May-June, June-July, and April-May respectively for 120 days long paddy crops.

The package includes a subsidy for machine planting and quality certified seeds to farmers. A similar package will be provided to farmers in the Delta districts to increase the area and food grain production during Kuruvai and a sum of Rs 58 crore will be allocated for the purpose, he said.

Panneerselvam said the government would arrange an international exposure visit for paddy farmers.

"Malaivazh Uzhavar Munnetra Thittam" (The hill farmers development scheme) will be implemented this year at Rs 22.80 crore for the welfare of 63,000 hill farmers in 20 districts. The scheme covers minor millet cultivation, distribution of inputs, area expansion in vegetable crops, farm machinery, value addition, Micro Irrigation and Integrated Farming System, and steps to provide Kisan credit cards.

Maize production will be enhanced in an area of 1.87 lakh acres at Rs 40.27 crore under Union and State funds. Organic farming will be encouraged in 37 districts at an outlay of Rs 12 crore.

Crop Insurance Scheme will be implemented to protect farmers from income loss, he said and added this scheme will be implemented during 2025-26 for Rs 841 crore to cover 35 lakh acres.

Leader of the Opposition Edappadi K Palaniswami termed the Agriculture Budget as an instance of 'DMK's deception tactic' and said the state government has set a record in presenting the Agriculture Budget continuously for five years. *—PTI*

Andhra Pradesh DyCM Pawan Kalyan's comments come amid TN CM MK Stalin accusing the Union government of 'Hindi imposition' *PHOTO: PTI*

Why oppose Hindi but profit from it: Pawan Kalyan to TN

BHILAI/RAIPUR, 15 MARCH

Janasena Party Chief and Andhra Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan criticised Tamil Nadu politicians for what he called "hypocrisy" regarding the alleged imposition of Hindi in the state.

He pointed out that while these leaders oppose Hindi, they allow Tamil movies to be dubbed in the language for financial gain.

"I do not understand why some criticize Sanskrit. Why do Tamil Nadu politicians oppose Hindi while allowing their movies to be dubbed in Hindi for financial gain? They want money from Bollywood but refuse to accept Hindi--what kind of logic is that?" Kalyan asked while addressing the party's 12th foundation day at Pithampuram in Kakinada.

Kalyan's comments come amid Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin accusing the Union government of 'Hindi imposition' and refusing to implement the three-language formula laid out in the NEP as a protest.

Emphasising India's linguistic diversity, Kalyan said that the country needs multiple languages, including Tamil, rather than just two dominant ones. "India needs multiple languages, including Tamil, not just two. We must embrace linguistic diversity - not only to maintain the integrity of our nation but also to foster love and unity among its people," Kalyan said.

His remarks follow Tamil Nadu CM Stalin's comments on 13 March, in which he labelled the NEP as a "saffronised policy" designed to promote Hindi rather than develop India. He alleged that the policy threatens to destroy Tamil Nadu's education system. "National Education Policy is not education policy, it is saffronise policy. The policy was not created to develop India but to develop Hindi. We are opposing the Policy as that would destroy the Tamil Nadu education system completely," Stalin said in Tiruvallur.

Stalin further accused the central government of withholding funds to pressure the state into implementing the NEP.

"We are asking for your tax share, which we paid with our efforts. What is the problem with this? Is it fair to threaten without releasing funds for the welfare of 43 lakh schools? As we didn't accept NEP, they are refusing to release funds that belong to Tamil Nadu," he said. *—ANI*

No ED summons to my son; ED created media hype, says Baghel

BHILAI/RAIPUR, 15 MARCH

Senior Congress leader and former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel on Saturday said his son hadn't received any notice from the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to appear before it in connection with an alleged liquor scam linked to a money laundering case in the state.

Asked if his son would appear before the probe agency, Bhupesh Baghel said the question of going to the ED office did not arise if he hadn't received a notice. He said when summons are served, they will be complied with.

On 10 March, ED raided the Baghel residence in Bhilai town as part of the probe into a money laundering allegation against his son in the alleged case, official sources said.

Searches were conducted at 13 more locations, including that of Laxmi Narayan Bansal, an alleged close associate of Chaitanya, under provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, they said. There were unconfirmed reports that the ED had summoned Chaitanya to record his statement on Saturday. The alleged liquor scam, as per the ED, was orchestrated when Chhattisgarh was ruled by a Congress government led by CM Baghel.

The agency said Chhattisgarh liquor "scam" resulted in "massive loss" to the state exchequer and filled the pockets of the beneficiaries of a liquor syndicate with more than Rs 2,100 crore of proceeds of crime. *—PTI*

Bhupesh Baghel *PHOTO: PTI*

Haryana BJP leader shot dead over land dispute

CHANDIGARH, 15 MARCH

A local BJP leader was shot dead in Haryana's Sonipat district allegedly over a land dispute, police said on Saturday.

The deceased Surendra Jawahar was the President of BJP's Mundlana Mandal in Sonipat. The attacker Monu, allegedly opened fire on Jawahar on Friday night. CCTV footage showed Jawahar entering a shop to save his life even as the attacker chased him and shot him dead, police said. "Jawahar had purchased land from Monu's uncle and aunt. They had a dispute over it that led to the murder," Rishi Kant ACP of Gohana, said. *—PTI*

Hindutva leader banned from Sambhajinagar

CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR, 15 MARCH

Hindutva leader Milind Ekbote has been barred from entering Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar from 16 March to 5 April amid calls from some outfits to remove the grave of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb located at Khuldabad in the district.

The order, which was issued on Saturday by the deputy resident collector, said Ekbote's organisation Dharmaveer Sambhaji Maharaj Pratisthan pays homage to the warrior-king annually in Pune and intelligence inputs were received about him and his supporters possibly coming to Khuldabad to remove tomb. It added that the Vishva Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal have planned agitations from 17 March seeking removal of the tomb. *—PTI*

Frequency of RaGa's Vietnam visits very curious: BJP

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

BJP claimed on Saturday that Rahul Gandhi is spending more time in Vietnam than his constituency, and said the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha needs to explain his "extraordinary fondness" for that country.

"Where is Rahul Gandhi? I heard he has gone to Vietnam," BJP leader and former Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said at a press conference where he attacked the Karnataka government for its decision to give four per cent quota in government contracts to Muslims.

Prasad said Gandhi was in the Southeast Asian country during the new year as well, claiming that he has spent nearly 22 days there.

"He does not spend so many days in his constituency. What is the reason of his so much love for Vietnam suddenly," the BJP leader asked.

Gandhi is the Leader of Opposition and should be available in India, he said.

BJP's IT department head Amit Malviya noted that the details of Gandhi's frequent foreign travels are neither disclosed to Parliament nor made public, as he asked the Congress to clarify the issue."

Ravi Shankar Prasad *PHOTO: PTI*

- The Congress has in turn accused the BJP of politicising his private visits, and has said that he as an individual has a right to travel abroad

The Congress has in turn accused the BJP of politicising his private visits, and has said that he as an individual has a right to travel abroad.

Gandhi's visit to Vietnam following the death of former prime minister and Congress leader Manmohan Singh on 26 December last year had also drawn criticism from the BJP.

Malviya had then said that while the country was mourning Singh's demise, Gandhi had flown to Vietnam to ring in the new year. *—PTI*

'SHAMELESS PARTY'

DYFI flags at Kerala temple festival: TDB orders probe

T'PURAM, 15 MARCH

Travancore Devaswom Board president PS Prasanth on Saturday said a vigilance probe has been ordered into the alleged display of Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI) flags and the performance of songs glorifying the CPI(M) at a recent temple festival in Kollam district.

The Congress-led UDF criticised the incident at the temple and accused the ruling party of being "a shameless party" attempting to create space for the BJP in the state.

Leader of Opposition in the state Assembly VD Satheesan, in a statement, said during the temple festival at Kadakkal temple in Kollam, symbols of the Left party, along with the names of CPI(M) and DYFI, were displayed in a background video while a singer performed a song about former CPI(M) member Pushpan. "Does this person have no other place to sing? Why are the devotees being asked if they know Pushpan? This is a shameless party. Is their goal to create conflict there and make room for the BJP... The problem is that the arrogance of power has gone to their heads," Satheesan contended. Earlier, TDB President Prasanth said the display of political flags or symbols inside temples is strictly prohibited by the courts, and the Board had issued a circular regarding this to all places of worship under its control. *—PTI*

TDB President Prasanth said the display of political flags or symbols inside temples is strictly prohibited by the courts *PHOTO: PTI*

RJD leader Tej Pratap Yadav with the police officer *PHOTO: PTI*

PERFORM 'THUMKA' FOR ME OR FACE SUSPENSION: TEJ PRATAP TO COP

PATNA, 15 MARCH

Maverick RJD leader Tej Pratap Yadav found himself at the centre of a fresh controversy on Saturday when a policeman was commanded by the former Bihar minister to perform a 'thumka' (pelvic thrust) or face suspension.

In a style reminiscent of the 'kapda faad Holi' that his father used to organise, Yadav tore off clothes of supporters who poured in to greet him, and also drove a scooter on the streets adjoining his house, screaming "Happy Holi Paltu Chacha", a taunt obviously aimed at Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who has aligned with and dumped the RJD twice. One of the videos of his revelry that has gone viral on social media show the Hasanpur MLA regally seated on a sofa, placed on a make-shift stage, holding a mike.

The cop did not seem much offended as although he did not break into a 'thumka', he nonetheless obliged Yadav by hopping a few times with his right arm raised high in the air. *—PTI*

After popcorn, donuts to be hit by 'GSTitis': Cong

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

The Congress on Saturday took a swipe at the government over its implementation of differential GST rates, saying that after popcorn, it is now the turn of donuts to get afflicted by "GSTitis".

Congress general secretary in-charge communications Jairam Ramesh cited a media report on X which stated that Singapore-based chain Mad Over Donuts is facing a Rs 100 crore tax notice for allegedly misclassifying its business and paying 5 per cent GST, claiming it is a restaurant service, as opposed to paying 18 per cent tax on bakery items.

In December last year, Congress raised the "absurdity" of three different tax slabs for popcorn under GST only brings to light the growing complexity of the system and asked whether Centre will show the courage to launch a complete overhaul for instituting a GST 2.0. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

Lakshyahira Das, Assamese composer dies

GUWAHATI, 15 MARCH

Celebrated Assamese composer Lakshyahira Das passed away on Saturday at the age of 94 due to age-related ailments, her family reported. She leaves behind three sons. Das, a retired professor at Cotton College, was the first female artist to gain All India Radio approval as a lyricist, composer, and singer in 1948 while still a student. With over 2,000 songs to her name, she continued to write lyrics and perform throughout her life. An accomplished author with over 50 publications, she received numerous awards for her contributions to literature and culture. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and Union Ports Minister Sarbananda Sonowal expressed condolences, highlighting her significant impact on Assam's cultural and educational landscape. *—PTI*

ONGC employee kills sons, dies by suicide

KAKINADA, 15 MARCH

A 37-year-old ONGC employee, V Chandra Kishore, has reportedly killed his two young sons due to concerns over their academic performance before taking his own life, according to local police. The incident occurred around 10am on Friday, with police stating that Kishore allegedly drowned his sons in a bucket of water. Believing his children would struggle in a competitive world if they did not excel academically, Kishore's actions were driven by despair, the official revealed. A suicide note has been discovered and is currently under examination. Kishore's wife, Rani, found her husband hanging in their bedroom, while their children were found lifeless. An investigation is ongoing as forensic teams assess the scene to clarify the circumstances around the event. *—PTI*

Mumbai School driver held for raping 15-yr-old

THANE, 15 MARCH

A school van driver has been arrested for allegedly sexually assaulting a 15-year-old girl in Navi Mumbai. The police registered a case under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act on Thursday, following a complaint. According to the police, the girl was on her way to college on 3 March when the accused, who lived in her neighborhood, lured her into his school van. He allegedly drove her to a secluded spot in Chinchwali Shivara, where the assault occurred. The victim informed her parents about the incident on Thursday, and the police subsequently arrested the accused. He has been remanded in police custody until 18 March. The police are investigating the case further. *—PTI*

Communal clashes erupt during Holi

Mosques were vandalised across the country; 'Jai Shri Ram' painted on Sambhal masjid

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Holi celebrations, a joyous and fun occasion for many, saw a surge in violence, communal clashes, sexual harassment and misdemeanours throughout the country. The festivities revealed the harsh chinks in Indian 'unity,' as mosques were attacked and vandalised, women were molested and an internet shutdown was declared in a district in West Bengal.

On the eve of Holi, 189 mosques in Uttar Pradesh were reportedly covered with a tarpaulin to dissuade people from painting it with Holi colours. Many Muslim clerics even revised the timings for the evening prayers, as this year's Holi coincides with the month of Ramadan. Security forces across the state, including in the communally tense Sambhal district, were said to be tightened.

Despite these measures, a mosque in Sambhal was reportedly vandalised, with people writing a coloured 'Jai Shri Ram' on the entrance of tarpaulined mosque. A day before the incident, police had conducted a flag march in Sambhal to reassure people of their safety.

Communal clashes across the country marred Holi celebrations. A mob in Maharashtra tried to ram down a mosque door, while others sang anti-Muslim slogans outside one in Uttar Pradesh *PHOTO: PTI*

Similarly, in Aligrah people reportedly threw colours on the Abdul Karim Masjid, which was also covered with a tarpaulin. The group then proceeded to sing provocative songs around the premises, seemingly in an attempt to flare up communal tensions. Videos of them singing anti-Muslim have since gone viral.

In Maharashtra, meanwhile, a group attempted to ram open the gates of a mosque in Ratnagiri with a tree trunk. The incident took place during an annual Shimga celebration, a precursor to the Holi celebrations.

During Shimga, a procession is supposed to carry a long tree trunk and touch it at various religious sites, including placing it at the footsteps of a mosque. This year however, the mob decided to try and break open the mosque, with videos purportedly showing them raising slogans.

A heated argument turned into stone pelting in Punjab's Ludhiana, where at least three people were reportedly injured when a few Muslim men objected to loud music being played outside a mosque.

Sexual Harassment

Unconsented physical contact and sexual harassment have unfortunately made Holi a time of fear and discomfort for many women. This year was no different, as women across the country were reportedly harassed, groped and faced unwanted physical advances.

Several videos have gone viral online, showing men touching groping women, attempting to remove articles of clothing, and other such unwanted physical advances. In a few of such videos, men can be purportedly seen attempting to remove a saree, holding a woman and sexually molesting her, and groping a woman. *—Agencies*

Internet shutdown in WB district after clash

New Delhi, 15 March

Internet and Voice over Internet calls were suspended until 17 March in the five Gram Panchayat's in Birbhum district of West Bengal after a violent communal clash in the region. The prolonged stone pelting fight, left several injured. Twenty-one people have since been arrested in connection with the clash. However, the inciting incident of the clash is still unclear. Security has been tightened in the district, with police claiming that the situation is now under control. *-Agencies*

Dozens injured in violence across UP

Ranchi, 15 March

Clashes erupted across Uttar Pradesh, over caste-based disputes and drunken altercations. In Mathura district, 8 to 10 were injured in a confrontation between upper-caste men and Dalit residents in Bati village in Jait area of the district. In Farrukhabad district, six people, including a woman, were injured after miscreants opened fire on Dalit people heading to perform Holi rituals. In Sant Kabir Nagar district, several huts were burned to ashes, killing a 60-year-old woman. *-PTI*

Traffic violations surge over 100 pc during Holi

New Delhi, 15 March

Traffic violations surged by 139 per cent during Holi celebrations this year. A total of 7,230 challans were issued on Holi this year, marking a sharp increase from 3,589 violations recorded in 2024. The number of people caught for drunken driving surged to 1,213 in 2025 compared to 824 in 2024. Similarly, helmet-related violations increased by 56 per cent to 2,376 this year from 1,524 challans in 2024. *—PTI*

Rajasthan cops boycott celebrations in protest

Jaipur, 15 March

Rajasthan Police personnel in several districts distanced themselves from Holi celebrations in protest. Their main demands revolve around promotions and salary discrepancies. They are calling for timely Departmental Promotion Committees (DPCs) meetings to ensure promotions, similar to other departments, increase in mess allowance among others. "The boycott of Holi is for pressing for our long-standing demands," a policeman in Jaipur said. *—PTI*

Six houses of the fourteen accused were demolished in Ahmedabad, after police claimed they were 'illegal' *PHOTO: X/@SVISHNUREDDY*

'Illegal' houses of Ahmedabad clashes accused demolished

AHMEDABAD, 15 MARCH

Authorities on Saturday demolished "illegally constructed" houses of six out of 14 accused arrested for attacking commuters and rioting in Ahmedabad, police said.

The Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation was demolishing the illegal structures amid heavy police presence, the official said.

"The AMC is taking action to remove these illegal constructions. Around 700-800 police personnel were deployed," a police official said.

The buildings of six of the arrested were found to be constructed illegally and were being demolished in the Amraiwadi and Khokhar localities of the city.

Fourteen persons, one of them a minor, were apprehended after a mob attacked some passersby with sticks and swords, leaving three injured and as many vehicles damaged.

One of the accused attacked and stabbed the complainant on the back of his neck and his left hand, and another man similarly stabbed his cousin. They also damaged their vehicle and other vehicles parked on the roadside before escaping.

Gujarat Director General of Police Vikas Sahay recently instructed police to prepare a list of "anti-social elements" living in each police station area take strict punitive action against them, an official statement said.

Once these lists are prepared, authorities have to take action against illegal construction, encroachment, and illegal power connection or such elements, and if such persons are found involved in illegal acts after being out on bail, their bail should be cancelled. *—PTI*

1 killed in Vadodara car crash, drunk driver screams 'another'

VADODARA, 15 MARCH

A tragic incident early on Friday saw a woman killed and four others injured when a speeding car, driven by a 20-year-old law student, ploughed into their two-wheelers in Gujarat's Vadodara city. Videos which have now gone viral show the driver, Rakshit Chaurasiya, repeatedly shouting "another round, another round!" after exiting the vehicle.

Police arrested Chaurasiya at the scene, with Deputy Commissioner of Police Panna Momaya suggesting that drunk driving may be a factor, as he appeared intoxicated.

The deceased has been identified as Hemali Patel, who. Chaurasiya, originally from Varanasi, lives in a local PG accommodation and was driving a car belonging to his friend, Mit Chauhan, who was in the passenger seat during the crash.

Witnesses captured a video showing Chauhan blaming Chaurasiya for the incident, while the latter was incoherent and aggressive.

Chaurasiya later told reporters that he wasn't drunk and lost control of the car after hitting a pothole. *—PTI*

A view of the damaged car after it collided with a two-wheeler, in Vadodara on Thursday night *PHOTO: ANI*

PHOTO: X

FATHER BOOKED AFTER MINOR SON DRIVES CAR IN VIRAL VIDEO

KOZHIKODE, 15 MARCH

Police charged a man after a viral video showed his 13-year-old son driving an Innova car on a public road. The footage, initially uploaded in October, only recently came to police attention when it was shared through the Subhayathra portal, a Kerala police initiative for reporting traffic offences. The father, Naushad, 37, faces charges under BNS 125 for endangering life and multiple sections of the Motor Vehicle Act, He had earlier been accused of letting his son ride on the roof of a moving car, although that had occurred on private property. *—PTI*

Policeman dies after assault in Bihar's Munger

MUNGER, 15 MARCH

An assistant sub-inspector (ASI) died following an alleged assault by a group of individuals in Bihar's Munger district, according to police reports. The deceased, ASI Santosh Kumar Singh, was serving at the Mufassil police station.

The incident occurred on Friday evening in Nandlalpur village while Singh was investigating a separate scuffle. Around 8.30pm, he was attacked with a sharp weapon, sustaining severe injuries to his head. Despite being rushed to a local hospital and later transferred to Patna for advanced treatment, he succumbed to his injuries early on Saturday.

Chandan Kumar, the Station House Officer of Mufassil police station, said a case has been registered and four suspects are currently in custody.

This tragedy follows a similar occurrence in Araria district where ASI Rajeev Ranjan was killed during a confrontation between police and protestors over an arrest. *—PTI*

DIG Rakesh Kumar pays last respects to ASI Santosh Kumar Singh, who was fatally assaulted in Munger, Bihar on 15 March *PHOTO: PTI*

GOVERNMENT REPORT

30,207 Bihar wards have unsafe drinking water

PATNA, 15 MARCH

Bihar is grappling with severe groundwater contamination, with 30,207 rural wards exposed to "unsafe" drinking water, a new report, part of the Bihar Economic Survey (2024-2025) said.

The report highlighted the presence of arsenic in groundwater in 4,709 such wards, fluoride in 3,789 wards and iron in 21,709 wards.

"Around 26 per cent of the rural wards in 31 districts, out of a total of 38, have groundwater sources affected by arsenic, fluoride and iron contamination beyond permissible limits," the state's Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) said in the study.

Dr Manoj Kumar, a leading gastroenterologist in Bihar, told PTI, "The high level of chemical contamination in groundwater is certainly a matter of concern."

"The authorities should come out with standardisation and classification of the quality of water used for drinking purposes," he added. "There are no recognised and accepted standards for drinking water in the country. The type of contaminant and its health effects vary depending on the water source," he said.

The health impacts of water contamination can vary from a bout of stomach infection to terminal illnesses like cancer, Kumar said.

"Sensing the gravity of the situation, the state government has decided to make rural Bihar 'hand pump-free' and provide safe drinking water to people in rural," PHED Minister Niraj Kumar Singh told PTI. "The state government is already working on a plan to use river water for drinking purposes. We have Rs 1,347-crore project for the supply of water from Sone river for drinking purposes in Aurangabad, Dehri and Sasaram cities." *—PTI*

Drinking water faces severe contamination in Bihar *PHOTO: PTI*

Contractor held in ₹122cr New India Co-Op Bank scam

MUMBAI, 15 MARCH

The Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of the Mumbai police arrested an accused from Vadodara in the Rs 122-crore embezzlement at New India Cooperative Bank, an official said on Saturday.

Civil contractor Kapil Dedhia was apprehended in the Gujarat city on Friday and brought to Mumbai on Saturday.

A local court here remanded him in police custody till 19 March, he said.

According to the police, Rs 12 crore of the misappropriated amount was credited to Dedhia's account. He received a part of the money from real estate developer Dharmesh Paun, also an accused.

Dedhia also received money from Unnathan Arunachalam, another wanted accused in the case, and prime accused Hitesh Mehta, the bank's former general manager and head of accounts.

PHOTO: PTI

Including Dedhia, EOW has arrested five persons so far.

The bank's former chairman Hiren Bhanu and his wife, ex-vice-chairperson Gauri Bhanu, who fled abroad just before the scam came to light are yet to be apprehended.

Rs 122 crore was embezzled from the safes of the bank's Prabhadevi and Goregaon offices in Mumbai. *—PTI*

2KG GANJA SEIZED AT KERALA COLLEGE; TWO MORE HELD

VADODARA, 15 MAR

Kerala police have arrested two former students, Ashique and Sharil, in connection with the seizure of two kilograms of ganja, which earlier led to the arrest of three students at the Government Polytechnic College hostel in Kalamassery. The new accused were reportedly suppliers of the contraband. Thrikkakara Assistant Commissioner of Police PV Baby revealed that this was the first instance of a large quantity of ganja being delivered to the hostel, although smaller amounts had been supplied earlier.

The arrests triggered a political row, with Congress alleging that the SFI is responsible for the widespread distribution and consumption of drugs in colleges. *—PTI*

CHOPPED FOR SUMMIT

Amazon rainforest cut down to build a new four-lane highway for COP30 climate summit in the Brazilian city of Belem. The irony is not lost on locals and environmentalists who are outraged at the environmental impact
PHOTO: PTI

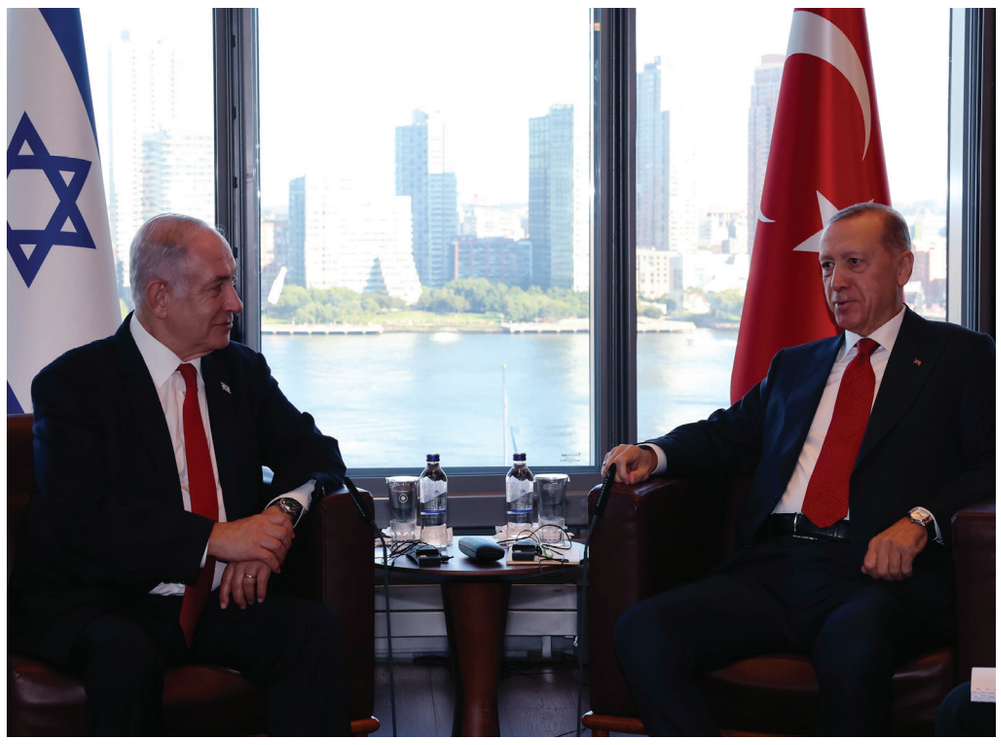
Turkey, Israel face increased tensions over Syria's future

The fall of Syrian President Bashar Assad's government has aggravated already tense relations between Turkey and Israel, with their conflicting interests in Syria pushing the relationship toward a possible collision course.

Turkey, which long backed groups opposed to Assad, has emerged as a key player in Syria and is advocating for a stable and united Syria, in which a central government maintains authority over the whole country.

It welcomed a breakthrough agreement that Syria's new interim government signed this week with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, to integrate with the Syrian government and army.

Israel, on the other hand, remains deeply suspicious of Syria's interim president, Ahmad al-Sharaa, pointing to his roots in al-Qaida. It's also wary of Turkey's influence over Damascus and appears to want to see Syria remain fragmented after the country under Assad was turned into a staging ground for its archenemy, Iran, and its proxies.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ***PHOTO: X***

"Syria has become a theater for proxy warfare between Turkey and Israel, which clearly see each other as regional competitors," said Asli Aydintasbas, of the Washington-based Brookings Institute. "This is a very dangerous dynamic because in all different aspects of Syria's transition, there is a clash of Turkish and Israeli positions."

Following Assad's fall, Israel seized territory in southern Syria, which Israeli officials said was aimed at keeping hostile groups away from its border. The new Syrian government and the United Nations have said Israel's incursions violate a 1974 ceasefire agreement between the two countries and have called for Israel to withdraw. Israel has also conducted airstrikes targeting military assets left behind by Assad's forces and expressed plans to maintain a long-term presence in the region.

Analysts say Israel is concerned over the possibility of Turkey expanding its military presence inside Syria. Since 2016, Turkey has launched operations in northern Syria to push back Syrian Kurdish militias linked to the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, and maintains influence in the north of the country through military bases and alliances with groups that opposed Assad.

Turkish defense officials have said Turkiye and Syria are now cooperating to strengthen the country's defense and security.

Israeli officials say they will not tolerate a Syrian military presence south of Damascus and have threatened to invade a Damascus suburb in defense of members of the Druze minority sect, who live in both Israel and Syria, after short-lived clashes broke out between the new Syrian security forces and Druze armed factions.

Turkey and Israel once were close allies, but the relationship has been marked by deep tensions under Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's more than two-decade rule, despite brief periods of reconciliation. Erdogan is an outspoken critic of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians, while Israel has been angered by Erdogan's support for Hamas.

Following the war in Gaza, Turkey strongly denounced Israel's military actions, announced it was cutting trade ties with Israel, and joined a genocide case South Africa brought against Israel at the UN International Court of Justice.

Aydintasbas said Turkish authorities are now increasingly concerned that Israel is "supportive of autonomy demands from Kurds, the Druze and Alawites."

Erdogan issued a thinly veiled threat against Israel last week, saying, "Those who seek to provoke ethnic and religious (divisions) in Syria to exploit instability in the country."

Israel's involvement in Syria is deepening, with the country pledging protection and economic aid to the Druze community in southern Syria at a time of heightened sectarian tensions.

The Druze, a small religious sect, are caught between Syria's new Islamist-led government in Damascus and Israel, which many Syrians view as a hostile neighbor leveraging the Druze's plight to justify its intervention in the region. Israel says it sent food aid trucks to the Druze in southern Syria and is allowing some Syrian Druze to cross into the Israeli-controlled part of the Golan Heights to work.

Aydintasbas said the escalating tensions are cause for serious concern.

"Before we used to have Israel and Turkey occasionally engage in spats, Right now, the question is, do they know each other's red lines?," Aydintasbas said. *—PTI*

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

SALAR سالار

Why are suicide rates so high in bipolar disorder?

Heston Blumenthal, the celebrity chef known for his experimental cuisine, recently shared his experience of being sectioned under the UK's Mental Health Act, saying it was "the best thing" that could have happened to him.

His openness about living with bipolar disorder highlights the little-discussed fact that people with this condition face one of the highest suicide risks of any mental illness.

Bipolar disorder is a severe mental illness characterised by episodes of mania (high energy, impulsivity) and depression (hopelessness, fatigue). Suicidal thoughts and behaviour are a core feature of the disorder, with fluctuating risk that can persist over long periods.

Although bipolar disorder affects around 2 per cent of the population, studies suggest that up to 50 per cent of people with the condition attempt suicide at least once, and 15-20 per cent die by suicide – a rate much higher than in the general population. Unlike global suicide rates, suicide deaths in bipolar disorder have not declined.

Understanding why suicide is so common in people with this disorder is difficult.

But one major factor is mood instability. Rapid shifts between emotional highs and lows, as well as mixed states where symptoms of mania (impulsivity) and depression (despair) occur together, can be particularly dangerous.

Social and economic factors also play a role. Research we conducted at Swansea University shows that the population suffering from bipolar disorder has become poorer over the last two decades.

Financial strain, social isolation and poorer access to healthcare all lead to worse outcomes. Beyond suicide, people with the condition die up to 20 years earlier than the general population, often from preventable health problems.

While bipolar disorder cannot be cured, it can be managed. The most commonly used drug, lithium, has been found to reduce suicide risk significantly in some patients. However, people with the condition struggle to take it regularly.

The drug's side-effects can affect the kidneys, thyroid, metabolism, cognition and cardiovascular health. Managing these side-effects often makes long-term treatment difficult.

Many however stop taking their medication during manic phases, believing they are cured.

Other treatments, such as antipsychotics, mood stabilisers and electroconvulsive therapy, can also be effective in some types and phases of bipolar – for example, in states of mixed mania and depression where there is a high risk of suicide – but they come with their own harms and limitations.

Even when people seek help, healthcare systems often fail to intervene effectively. Suicide risk is highest in the days following discharge from a psychiatric hospital.

Many who later die by suicide had recently visited emergency rooms, but the help they received was either delayed or not enough.

Existing tools to identify and measure suicide risk, such as checklists, questionnaires and structured interviews, are ineffective. Many with bipolar disorder who die by suicide are assessed as "low risk" shortly beforehand, exposing a crucial gap between doctor and patient perceptions.

Despite the significant effect that bipolar disorder has on individuals, families and society, the development of new drugs has been frustratingly slow. Lithium, first used in the 1940s, remains the go-to treatment, while most other drugs were originally designed to treat schizophrenia. No truly new treatments have emerged in decades.

One difficulty is that bipolar is not a single disorder but a spectrum of conditions, rendering the one-size-fits-all approach inadequate — lithium is effective in only about one in three patients.

Blumenthal's story highlights that being sectioned, while traumatic, can save lives and keep people safe. Yet the stigma around psychiatric hospitalisation prevents many from seeking care.

There is a widespread belief that hospitalisation should be avoided at all costs – but for some, it can be the difference between life and death. However, hospitalisation alone is not enough. The mental health system must do better to ensure that people with bipolar disorder receive long-term care, particularly during high-risk periods.

While the statistics on bipolar are alarming, the message should be one of hope. The condition is treatable and suicide is preventable. *—PTI*

50 per cent of people with bipolar disorder attempt suicide at least once ***PHOTO: FREEPIK***

After Columbia arrests, international students in colleges fall silent

In the span of a week, a hush has descended on higher education in the United States.

International students and faculty have watched the growing crackdown on pro-Palestinian protesters at Columbia University with apprehension. Some say they are familiar with government crackdowns but never expected them on American college campuses.

The elite New York City university has been the focus of the Trump administration's effort to deport foreigners who took part in pro-Palestinian demonstrations at colleges last year.

Federal immigration agents have arrested two foreigners — one of them a student — who protested last year at Columbia. They've revoked the visa of another student, who fled the US this week. Department of Homeland Security agents also searched the on-campus residences of two Columbia students on Thursday but did not make any arrests there.

GOP officials have warned it's just the beginning, saying more student visas are expected to be revoked in the coming days.

Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism issued a statement reporting "an alarming chill" among its foreign students in the past week.

"Many of our international students have felt afraid to come to classes and to events on campus," said the statement. "They are right to be worried."

International students and faculty across the US say they feel afraid to voice opinions or stand out on campus for fear of getting kicked out of the country.

"Green-card-holding faculty members involved in any kind of advocacy that might be construed as not welcome by the Trump administration are absolutely terrified of the implications for their immigration status," said Veena Dubal, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine.

Dubal, who is also general counsel for the American Association of University Professors, says some international faculty are now shying away from discourse, debate, scholarly research and publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals.

"We are literally not hearing their voices. There is a silencing happening that has a huge impact on the vibrancy of higher education," Dubal said.

"People are very scared," she added.

The first publicly known arrest occurred last Saturday, when federal immigration agents arrested Mahmoud Khalil, a prominent Palestinian activist and outspoken graduate student, in the lobby of his apartment building near the Columbia campus.

The deportations of Palestinian origin student Mahmoud Khalil and Indian origin student Ranjani Srinivasan from the US has set a chilling precedent in the country ***PHOTO: PTI***

Khalil has become the face of President Donald Trump's drive to punish what he calls antisemitic and anti-American protests that swept US campuses last year. Khalil, a legal US resident with a green card, is being held in a federal detention complex in Louisiana.

Civil rights advocates say the detention of Khalil is an assault on free speech. But the ongoing arrests send a wider message that disagreeing with the Trump administration could get you kicked out of the country, said Brian Hauss, a senior staff attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union.

"If the administration can do this to Khalil because of the speech about Palestine, it can do it to any non-US citizen who takes a position on hot-button global issues, including the war between Russia and Ukraine, the tariffs imposed against U.S. allies or the rise of far-right political parties in Europe," he said.

A Bangladeshi student at Louisiana State University, said she has stopped posting about anything political on social media since the first arrest at Columbia. She fears losing her green card.

"I feel like it's not safe for me to share those things anymore because I have a fear that a quote-unquote authoritarian regime' is lurking over social media posts," the student said. When she lived in Bangladesh, she said, people could be arrested for posting dissent on social media. "What I fear is a similar situation in the United States."

Some schools have been advising international students to be cautious of what they say publicly and online. Several international students on a variety of college campuses said they preferred not to speak with a reporter out of concern for their immigration status.

Administrators at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism have warned students who are not US citizens about their vulnerability to arrest or deportation.

"Nobody can protect you, these are dangerous times," the school's dean, Jelani Cobb, said in a post Thursday on Bluesky explaining the comment. "

Leqaa Kordia, a Palestinian from the West Bank, was arrested by immigration officers for overstaying her student visa, the Department of Homeland Security said Friday. The former student's visa was terminated in January 2022 for "lack of attendance," the department said. She was previously arrested for her involvement in protests at Columbia in April 2024.

The Trump administration also revoked the visa of Ranjani Srinivasan, an Indian citizen and doctoral student at Columbia University, for allegedly "advocating for violence and terrorism." Srinivasan opted to "self-deport" Tuesday, five days after her visa was revoked, the department said.

The president has warned the arrest and attempted deportation of Khalil will be the "first of many." Secretary of State Marco Rubio said more student visas were likely to be revoked in the coming days. *—PTI*

PHOTO: ANI

Cuba experiences nationwide power outage

HAVANA, 15 MARCH

A nationwide power outage left more than 10 million people in Cuba without electricity on Friday night, marking one of the most severe blackouts the country has faced in recent years. Homes, businesses, and public infrastructure were severely impacted across the island.

The Ministry of Energy and Mines reported that the blackout stemmed from a significant failure at the Diezmero substation in western Cuba, leading to a widespread collapse of the National Electric System. "At around 8.15pm, a failure at the Diezmero substation caused a major loss of generation in the west," the ministry stated. *—PTI*

Storm causes tornadoes and wildfire in US

OKLAHOMA CITY, 15 MARCH

The threat of tornadoes moved east into the Mississippi Valley and Deep South on Saturday, a day after a massive storm system moving across the country unleashed winds that damaged buildings, whipped up dust storms that caused deadly crashes and fanned more than 100 wildfires in several central states. Winds gusting up to 130 kph were predicted from the Canadian border to Texas. Three people were killed Friday in car crashes during a dust storm and one pileup of 38 cars were estimated. Heavy rain could bring flash flooding to some parts of the East Coast on Sunday. Experts say it's not unusual to see such weather extremes in March. Several buildings were damaged in the storm. Wildfires in the Southern Plains threatened to spread rapidly amid warm, dry weather and strong winds, and evacuations were ordered Friday for some communities in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri and New Mexico. *—PTI*

Balochistan rights group reports surge in abuses

BALOCHISTAN, 15 MARCH

Paank, the human rights department of Baloch National Movement, has reported alarming human rights violations in Balochistan throughout February 2025, highlighting a pattern of state repression, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings by Pakistani forces. Total number of enforced disappearances for the month reached 134, while 50 individuals were released after enduring both mental and physical torture, as cited by Paank. In February 2025, 18 cases of extrajudicial killings were recorded. Lack of independent investigations and accountability has further deepened fear and insecurity among the affected communities, while those responsible continue to act with impunity. *—PTI*

UN Chief Guterres visits B'desh, talks Rohingya crisis

DHAKA, 15 MARCH

During his four-day visit to Bangladesh, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that he aims to bring global attention to the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis, while also acknowledging the country's reform efforts. In a post on X, Guterres reaffirmed his commitment to advocating for more humanitarian aid for the displaced Rohingya people. Upon his arrival on Friday, he expressed his gratitude to the country's interim government and its citizens for their warm reception. Their discussions covered a range of issues, including the country's reform agenda, humanitarian initiatives, and Bangladesh's ongoing collaboration with the UN to address critical concerns. *—PTI*

Russia, Ukraine launch aerial attacks

Starmer urges allies to maintain pressure on Russia to agree to ceasefire

MOSCOW/ KYIV/ LONDON, 15 MARCH

Russia and Ukraine traded heavy aerial blows overnight Saturday, with both sides reporting more than 100 enemy drones over their respective territories ceasefire talks, even as UK PM called upon countries to keep the pressure on Russia to agree to a ceasefire.

The attack comes less than 24 hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin met with US envoy Steve Witkoff to discuss details of the American proposal for a 30-day ceasefire in the war with Ukraine,

Russia's Defence Ministry said that it had shot down 126 Ukrainian drones, 64 of which were destroyed over the Volgograd region. Meanwhile, Ukraine's air force said Saturday that Russia had launched a barrage of 178 drones over the country overnight. The barrage was a mixture of Shahed-type attack drones and imitation drones designed to confuse air defenses.

Russian "Grad" self-propelled multiple rocket launcher fires towards Ukrainian positions near Chasiv Yar, Donetsk region, Ukraine **PHOTO: PTI**

The Russian army, backed by North Korean troops, are now close to completely driving Ukrainian forces from their foothold in Russia's Kursk border region in what would be a major setback for Kyiv.

Kremlin spokesperson Dimitry Peskov said on Friday that a possible phone call between Putin and Trump to settle outstanding ceasefire issues could be arranged after Witkoff delivers the messages in Washington, "There is an understanding on both sides that such a call is needed," he said.

While stating "There are certainly some grounds for cautious optimism," Peskov said a lot needed to be done of the ceasefire proposal. "The president has shown solidarity with President Trump's position."

US officials have said Washington was set to discuss technical issues related to a possible ceasefire next week. Given the range of issues on the table, and the sharp differences between what Moscow and Kyiv want, it could potentially take weeks or months for the guns to fall silent.

Meanwhile, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has urged global leaders to "keep the pressure" on Russian President Vladimir Putin to back a ceasefire in Ukraine.

At a virtual gathering of all NATO countries except US, in his opening remarks Saturday to a virtual gathering of what he has termed the "coalition of the willing", Starmer said Putin will "sooner or later" have to "come to the table". *—PTI*

Was sarcastic on ending war in 24 hours: Trump

WEST PALM BEACH, 15 MARCH

President Donald Trump said Friday that he was "being a little bit sarcastic" when he repeatedly claimed as a candidate that he would have the Russia-Ukraine war solved within 24 hours - and even before he even took office. Trump was asked about the vow he repeatedly made on the campaign trail even as as his administration is still trying to broker a solution 54 days into his second term. "Well, I was being a little bit sarcastic when I said that," Trump said in a clip released ahead of the episode airing Sunday. "What I really mean is I'd like to get it settled and, I'll, I think, I think I'll be successful." It was a rare admission who has a long record of making exaggerated claims. *—PTI*

Indian at Columbia gets visa revoked

NEW YORK/ WASHINGTON, 15 MARCH

Amidst US government crackdown on pro-palestine protestors, an Indian student at Columbia University, whose visa was revoked for allegedly "advocating for violence and terrorism" and involvement in activities supporting Hamas, has self-deported.

Ranjani Srinivasan, a citizen and national of India, entered the United States on a F-1 student visa as a doctoral student in Urban Planning at Columbia University, the Department of Homeland Security said in a statement on Friday. It added that Srinivasan was "involved in activities supporting" Hamas, a terrorist organisation.

The Department of State had revoked her visa on 5 March. The Department of Homeland Security said it has obtained video footage of Srinivasan using the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Home App to self-deport on 11 March which allows overstaying citizens to "leave now and self deport" so they may have the opportunity to return later legally.

Ranjani Srinivasan **PHOTO: X**

Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem said in the statement that it is a "privilege to be granted a visa to live and study in the United States of America".

"When you advocate for violence and terrorism, that privilege should be revoked, and you should not be in this country. I am glad to see one of the Columbia University terrorist sympathisers use the CBP Home app to self-deport," Noem said. Another student, Leqaa Kordia, a Palestinian from West Bank, also involved in protests, was arrested for overstaying her expired F-1 student visa. Previously, in April 2024, The Trump administration has arrested Columbia University graduate and legal permanent resident Mahmoud Khalil of Palestinian heritage for his role in leading campus protests at Columbia against Israel. Last week, the Trump administration had announced the immediate cancellation of approximately USD 400 million in federal grants and contracts to Columbia University due to the "school's continued inaction in the face of persistent harassment of Jewish students". On Thursday, the Columbia University Judicial Board issued "sanctions" to students ranging from "multi-year suspensions, temporary degree revocations, and expulsions" related to the occupation of Hamilton Hall last spring during the Gaza protests. *—PTI*

Who is Ranjani Srinivasan?

Srinivasan seems to have impressive academic credentials, with an MPhil in Urban Planning from Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation (GSAPP) and a Bachelor of Design (B.Des.) degree from CEPT University. She also holds a Master's in Design from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Her research focuses on the changing nature of land-labour relations in India's peri-urban areas. According to her profile on NYU Wagner's official website, her primary areas of interest include the political economy of development, the spatial politics of land and the sociology of labour. *—Salar News*

Trump demands control at Columbia

NEW YORK, 15 MARCH

Funding cuts and crackdown on protestors, deportations notwithstanding, the Trump administration ordered Columbia University to oust the leadership of an academic department, a demand seen as a direct attack on academic freedom and a warning of what is to come for other colleges facing federal scrutiny.

Federal officials told the university it must place its Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies Department under "academic receivership for a minimum of five years". It was among several described as conditions for receiving federal funding, including USD 400 million already pulled over 'antisemitism.' *—PTI*

Funding bill passed before deadline

WASHINGTON, 15 MARCH

The Senate passed a six-month spending bill on Friday hours before a government shutdown, overcoming sharp Democratic opposition to the measure and sending it to President Donald Trump to be signed into law.

The essentially party-line vote, 54-46, reflected gnawing Democratic angst over how to confront the Trump administration as its Department of Government Efficiency fires federal workers. Democrats argued over whether to fight even risking a shutdown and fumed that Republicans drafted a measure that included little of their input, short-changing health care, housing and other priorities. *—PTI*

SOUTH AFRICA'S US AMBASSADOR NO LONGER WELCOME: RUBIO

WASHINGTON, 15 MARCH

Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on Friday that South Africa's ambassador to the United States "is no longer welcome" in the country. Rubio, in a post on X, accused Ebrahim Rasool of being a "race-baiting politician" who hates President Donald Trump and declared him "persona non grata".

In a highly unusual move for a high ranking diplomat, the State Department did not have additional details or give reasoning behind the decision. It was unclear whether the ambassador was even in the US at the time the decision was made. Rubio posted as he was flying back to Washington from a Group of 7 foreign ministers' meeting in Quebec. Rasool previously served as his country's ambassador to the US from 2010 to 2015 before returning this year.

He is known for participating in the anti-apartheid campaign and was a politician in Mandela's African National Congress Party. *—PTI*

Hamas said long-delayed talks over the ceasefire's second phase would need to begin the day of the release **PHOTO: PTI**

Hostage release depends on truce implementation: Hamas

CAIRO, 15 MARCH

Hamas said Saturday it would only release an American-Israeli and the bodies of four other hostages if Israel implements the existing ceasefire agreement in the Gaza Strip, calling it an "exceptional deal" aimed at getting the truce back on track.

A senior Hamas official said long-delayed talks over the ceasefire's second phase would need to begin the day of the release and last no longer than 50 days. Israel would also need to stop barring the entry of humanitarian aid and withdraw from a strategic corridor along Gaza's border with Egypt.

Hamas would also demand the release of more Palestinian prisoners in exchange for hostages, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the closed-door talks.

Edan Alexander, 21, who grew up in Tenafly, New Jersey, was abducted from his military base during Hamas' 7 October, 2023, attack that ignited the war, and is the last living American citizen held in Gaza.

There was no immediate comment from Israel, where government offices were closed for the weekly Sabbath. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office on Friday accused Hamas of "manipulation and psychological warfare" when the offer was initially made, before Hamas spelled out the conditions.

The United States said it presented on Wednesday a proposal to extend the ceasefire a few more weeks as the sides negotiate a permanent truce. It said Hamas was claiming flexibility in public while privately making "entirely impractical" demands. *—PTI*

Iraq, US forces kill ISIS leader in airstrike

BAGHDAD, 15 MAR

The head of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has been killed in a joint operation by the Iraqi intelligence service and US-led coalition forces, as revealed by Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani. Abdallah Maki Mosleh al-Rifai, known as "Abu Khadija," was labelled a "dangerous terrorist."

In a statement, Sudani remarked, "The Iraqis continue their impressive victories over the forces of darkness and terrorism," following an airstrike operation in Anbar province where al-Rifai was killed. President Trump also acknowledged the operation on his social media platform, celebrating the coalition's collaboration with Iraqi authorities. *—PTI*

Mark Carney sworn in as Prime Minister during a ceremony at Rideau Hall in Ottawa **PHOTO: PTI**

Carney sworn in as Canada's new PM amid trade row

TORONTO, 15 MAR

Mark Carney, the former central banker, has been sworn in as Canada's new Prime Minister, taking office as the country grapples with a tumultuous trade war initiated by US President Donald Trump. Carney, who succeeded Justin Trudeau following his resignation in January, faces significant challenges including potential annexation threats and an impending federal election.

During his inaugural address, Carney asserted, "We will never, ever, in any way shape or form, be part of the United States. America is not Canada." Trump's aggressive trade policies, including 25 per cent tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminium, have sparked renewed nationalism and could bolster the Liberal Party's standing in the upcoming elections.

He expressed readiness to engage with Trump, contingent on respect for Canadian sovereignty. His cabinet, comprising 13 men and 11 women, is smaller than Trudeau's team and includes François-Philippe Champagne as finance minister. With calls for a general election forthcoming, Carney's leadership will be closely scrutinised. *—PTI*

STRANDED FOR 9 MONTHS

SpaceX launches new crew to bring Sunita, Butch home

CAPE CANAVERAL, 15 MARCH

SpaceX has successfully launched a new crew to the International Space Station (ISS), paving the way for the return of NASA astronauts Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams, who have been stranded aboard the ISS for nearly nine months. The replacement astronauts are set to arrive late Saturday night, facilitating an important handover period before Wilmore and Williams' anticipated undocking next week.

This mission's urgency stems from earlier complications involving the Boeing Starliner, which encountered critical helium leaks and thruster failures. Wilmore and Williams, initially expecting to stay for only one week, were forced to remain in space while investigations unfolded. NASA eventually deemed it unsafe for Starliner to return with them on board, prompting a shift to a SpaceX launch for their eventual homecoming.

This mission's urgency stems from earlier complications involving the Boeing Starliner **PHOTO: X/SPACE X**

Now aboard the ISS, the newly arrived astronauts include NASA's Anne McClain and Nichole Ayers, along with Japan's Takuya Onishi and Russia's Kirill Peskov. Upon reaching the ISS, McClain remarked, "Spaceflight is tough, but humans are tougher," reflecting the spirit of resilience among the crew.

Beyond technical setbacks, the mission acquired political overtones this year, with President Trump and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk discussing the urgency of expediting the return of the astronauts while attributing delays to the previous administration. As Wilmore and Williams prepare for their long-awaited return, they eagerly await reunions with families grounded at home. *—PTI*

Serbia: Crowds greet students before anti-govt rally

BELGRADE, 15 MARCH

Tens of thousands of people flooded the streets of Serbia's capital on Friday, as citizens eagerly welcomed university students from across the country ahead of a major anti-government rally set for the weekend. This marks a significant moment in the ongoing anti-corruption demonstrations that have led to fears for President Aleksandar Vucic's consolidated grip on power.

In sharp contrast to attempts by Vucic's administration to suppress participation through fear tactics, the vibrant atmosphere in Belgrade showcased citizens determined to voice their dissent. The President, amidst escalating tensions, has warned of potential violence and proclaimed Saturday's rally as "illegal". Students have been at the forefront of the anti-graft movement, sparked by a tragic incident in which a train station canopy collapsed.

While Vucic's supporters camp at key locations, protestors remain resolute, with many voicing their aspirations for a fairer Serbia. *—PTI*

NCLAT orders probe into Chennai NCLT ruling

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

In a rare incident, appellate tribunal NCLAT has directed an investigation into an order passed by the Chennai bench of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT). The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) has directed the President of NCLT to conduct an enquiry into an order passed by it on March 15, 2022 saying it "cannot ignore the fact that the manner in which the order of 15.03.2022, has been passed", appears "dubious" and "not plausible". The facts and submissions in the matter "raise questions over the functioning of NCLT", the appellate tribunal observed while passing the order. "The President, NCLT, is requested to look into the issue and conduct an enquiry, particularly in order to attach fairness to the proceedings of the NCLT so as to repose confidence in the public at large on these major issues," said two-member bench comprising Judicial Member Justice Sharad Kumar Sharma and Technical Member Jatindranath Swain.—*PTI*

StanChart raises Rs 9,400 crore via first social bond

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Standard Chartered has raised Rs 9,400 crore through issuance of the first social bond which will support sustainable development projects across the bank's emerging market footprint, including India. The 8-year bond will primarily facilitate lending to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), ensuring access to finance, helping create jobs and empowering and nurturing women-owned SMEs, StanChart said in a statement on Friday. Of the total, about 50 per cent would be allocated for India for sustainable projects. Proceeds will also finance access to essential services including healthcare and education, and will facilitate investment into affordable basic infrastructure and food security, in line with the social activities set out in the bank's Sustainability Bond Framework, it said. The top five countries where StanChart's social assets are located include India (57 per cent), Malaysia (10 per cent), Bangladesh (6 per cent), Mainland China (5 per cent), and Nepal (4 per cent). Today, around USD 4.2 trillion in annual investment is needed across emerging markets to facilitate sustainable development, build resilience across businesses and communities, and facilitate enduring growth, it said. —*PTI*

Greek debt upgraded to investment grade

ATHENS, 15 MARCH

Greece's centre-right government on Saturday welcomed a credit rating upgrade by Moody's, the last major ratings agency to lift junk status on government bonds that began 15 years ago during a severe debt crisis. "(This) upgrade marks the closing of a great cycle for the Greek economy and certifies the country's return to European normality," Finance Minister Kostis Hatzidakis said, describing the action as "a success not only of the government, but of all Greeks". Moody's announced the upgrade to Baa3 from Ba1 late Friday. It cited public finances that "have improved more quickly than we had expected" as a key factor in its decision. The agency highlighted the government's policy stance, institutional improvements and stable political environment, saying it expects Greece to "continue to run substantial primary surpluses which will steadily decrease its high debt burden". Although ratings agencies began returning Greece to investment grade in late 2023, the good news was met with relief by a government that has been hammered for weeks by strikes over its handing of a deadly rail disaster two years ago. Greece spiralled into crisis in 2010 and received three international bailouts to avoid bankruptcy. —*PTI*

India-China trade gained momentum in Q4 2024: UN

Global trade reached $33T in 2024, surging by $1.2T

UNITED NATIONS, 15 MARCH

According to the UN report new risks—such as protectionist policies, trade imbalances, and geopolitical tensions—pose threats to global trade stability PHOTO: X

Developing nations, especially India and China, experienced above-average trade growth in the fourth quarter of 2024, according to a recent report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). However, the report also cautions of a potential global economic slowdown in the coming quarters.

The Global Trade Update highlights that global trade surged nearly USD 1.2 trillion in 2024, reaching a total of USD 33 trillion, driven by a 9 per cent increase in services trade and a 2 per cent rise in goods trade. Notably, China and India saw robust trade momentum, contrasting with many developed nations that faced trade contractions.

India recorded an 8 per cent growth in goods imports for Q4 2024 over the previous quarter, with annual imports growth at 6 per cent. Exports in goods grew by 7 per cent quarterly and 2 per cent annually. Meanwhile, services trade continued to progress, albeit at a slower rate, with India also achieving 10 per cent annual growth in services imports and exports alike.

Despite these promising figures, the report highlights widening goods trade imbalances, with an expanding US deficit and a rising surplus in China buoyed by strong exports. New risks—such as protectionist policies, trade imbalances, and geopolitical tensions—pose threats to global trade stability.

Furthermore, early 2025 has shown a decline in demand for container shipping, indicated by a substantial drop in the Shanghai Containerized Freight Index, hinting at weaker global trade volumes. The Baltic Dry Index, reflecting shipping rates for bulk commodities, remains low compared to 2024 levels.

Moreover, the possibility of trade policy escalations casts a shadow of uncertainty over the global trade outlook for 2025. On the other hand, the expected easing in global inflation and China's economic stimulus for 2025—with a growth target of about 5 per cent—may provide some tailwind to global trade.

This shift is evident in the implementation of broad new tariffs targeting specific countries, as well as more targeted tariffs affecting particular products, such as steel and aluminium.

These tariffs are expected to have significant repercussions on global and regional value chains. —*PTI*

India's February deal activity hits record $7.2B

PHOTO: X

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

India experienced a historic surge in deal-making in February, recording 226 mergers and acquisitions (M&A) and private equity (PE) transactions totalling USD 7.2 billion – the highest monthly deal volume seen in the past three years, according to Grant Thornton Bharat's Dealtracker report.

The data revealed a staggering 67 per cent increase in the number of deals and a 5.4-fold rise in deal values compared to February 2024, alongside a 14 per cent uptick from the previous month. Notably, 85 M&A deals worth USD 4.8 billion were executed, with domestic deals comprising 6 per cent of the volume and 78 per cent of the overall worth.

Despite global economic uncertainties, including reduced foreign investment in Indian public markets and impending trade tariffs, the Indian deal landscape showed resilience, spurred by robust domestic demand.

The Praana Group's USD 755 million acquisition of Owens Corning's glass reinforcement business accounted for 89 per cent of the manufacturing sector's total value.

Media and entertainment segment saw a sharp uptick in sports and gaming deals, including Torrent Group's USD 872 million acquisition of Irelia Sports (Gujarat Titans).

Total 141 transactions worth USD 2.4 billion made up for the private equity (PE) deals, it said, adding this was the highest PE volume since May 2022, with continued month-on-month growth since November 2024. Early-stage investments (Seed to Series A) dominated, forming nearly 50 per cent of total PE volumes. —*PTI*

PHOTO: X

Cement prices to increase due to new mineral tax by states

CHENNAI, 15 MARCH

Cement prices across various states are likely to increase as state governments may impose new mineral taxes after a Supreme Court judgement, according to JM Financial report.

Following the Supreme Court ruling in July 2024, which allowed states to levy taxes on mineral rights and mineral-bearing lands in addition to royalties, Tamil Nadu has introduced the Tamil Nadu Mineral Bearing Land Tax Act, 2024.

Under this law, an additional Rs 160 per tonne tax on limestone mining will take effect from 20 February, 2025. With other mineral-rich states, including Karnataka, considering similar measures, cement companies are expected to raise prices to offset rising costs.

The new tax is expected to significantly impact cement manufacturers operating in Tamil Nadu. As limestone is a key raw material in cement production, the additional tax will increase the cost of manufacturing, forcing companies to consider price hikes to maintain profitability.

To offset the cost impact, cement prices in Tamil Nadu are expected to rise by Rs 8-10 per bag.

However, with this new tax burden, companies may have no choice but to pass on the additional cost to consumers through price increases. Industry experts believe that Tamil Nadu's move may set a precedent for other mineral-rich states to introduce similar taxes. —*ANI*

Forex kitty jumps $15.26B to $653.96B

MUMBAI, 15 MARCH

In the most significant increase in over two years, India's foreign exchange reserves surged by USD 15.267 billion, reaching USD 653.966 billion in the week ending 7 March, according to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). This follows a decrease of USD 1.781 billion, which brought reserves down to USD 638.698 billion in the preceding week.

Recent trends had shown a decline in reserves primarily due to currency revaluation and the RBI's interventions in the foreign exchange market aimed at curbing rupee volatility.

At the end of September 2024, reserves had peaked at an all-time high of USD 704.885 billion. The rise during the reviewed week is largely attributed to a USD 10 billion forex swap executed by the central bank on 28 February, during which it acquired US dollars in exchange for rupees to boost liquidity. In the week under consideration, foreign currency assets—a key component of the reserves—rose by USD 13.993 billion to hit USD 557.282 billion. These assets reflect the impact of fluctuations in non-US currencies such as the euro, pound, and yen. Gold reserves experienced an increase of USD 1.053 billion, reaching USD 74.325 billion.

Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) rose by USD 212 million to USD 18.21 billion, while India's reserve position with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) fell by USD 69 million to USD 4.148 billion, as per the RBI data —*PTI*

AMID IRREGULARITIES

IndusInd bank is well-capitalised; no need for depositors to worry: RBI

MUMBAI, 15 MARCH

Amid the ongoing crisis in the IndusInd bank, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Saturday released a statement stating that the bank is well capitalised and financially stable.

The RBI said, "The Reserve Bank would like to state that the bank is well-capitalised and the financial position of the bank remains satisfactory."

The apex bank further added in the statement that as per auditor-reviewed financial results of the bank for the quarter ended 31 December, 2024, the bank has maintained a comfortable Capital Adequacy Ratio of 16.46 per cent and Provision Coverage Ratio of 70.20 per cent.

According to the RBI, the Liquidity Coverage Ratio (LCR) of the IndusInd bank was at 113 per cent as on 9 March, as against regulatory requirement of 100 per cent.

The RBI said that the board and the management of the IndusInd Bank Limited have been directed by Reserve Bank to have the remedial action completed fully during the current quarter viz., Q4FY25, after making required disclosures to all stakeholders.

"As such, there is no need for depositors to react to the speculative reports at this juncture. The bank's financial health remains stable and is being monitored closely by Reserve Bank," the RBI said.

The bank undertook internal trades which had low liquidity and were on swap basis where 3-5 yr yen deposits were to be swapped for 8-10 yr dollars for a multilateral. These trades were hedged where the hedges were marked to market but the internal swaps were on cost accounting basis and not mark to marketed. This resulted in discrepancies. —*ANI*

Geopolitics, economic uncertainty behind $3,000 gold price surge

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

PHOTO: X

Gold prices touched a historic milestone, hitting USD 3,000 per ounce, reinforcing its role as a safe-haven asset during times of economic uncertainty.

According to John Reade, Senior Market Strategist at the World Gold Council, gold has consistently performed well in risk-off environments, climbing from USD 1,000 during the financial crisis to USD 2,000 amid the pandemic, and now surpassing USD 3,000 as global uncertainty intensifies.

He said, "Gold hitting US$3,000 per ounce is a significant milestone and reinforces the asset's safe haven role in times of uncertainty. From $1,000 during the financial crisis to $2,000 amid the pandemic, gold has proven to perform well in risk-off environments as well as delivering returns in line with most other asset classes since 1971."

One of the key drivers behind gold's rise is the changing dynamics of central bank purchases. Since 2022, central banks have doubled their gold buying, accumulating over 1,000 tons annually, with 1,045 tons purchased in 2024 alone.

Reade attributes this surge to geopolitical factors such as de-dollarisation, inflation concerns, and economic sanctions, which have prompted central banks to strengthen their gold reserves.

Additionally, investment demand from emerging markets has grown significantly. In China, a stagnant property market has led investors to shift towards gold, while in Turkey, demand has surged as households seek to hedge against currency depreciation. In India, the government's import duty cuts have further fuelled gold purchases. —*ANI*

Realty firms buy 6,000 acres during 2022-24 for ₹90,000 cr

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Real estate developers have acquired 5,885 acres land during 2022-24 for Rs 90,000 crore to build projects amid strong demand for housing and commercial assets, according to JLL India.

Real estate consultant JLL India data showed that real estate developers bought 1,603 acres of land in 2022 for Rs 18,112 crore, 1,947 acres in 2023 for Rs 32,203 crore.

During 2024, the land acquisition by developers touched 2,335 acres costing Rs 39,742 crore.

During the 2022-24 period, real estate developers bought 5,885 acres for Rs 90,057 crore.

The data includes only outright purchases by real estate developers, the consultant said.

Joint development agreements (JDAs), signed between developers and land owners, have not been included for the analysis.

The land acquisitions of 2,335 acres in 2024, valued at Rs 39,742 crore, will generate development potential of 194 million (1,940 lakh) sq ft of real estate.

The consultant said 81 per cent of the land bought in 2024 will be used for development of residential projects. Tier I cities -- Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi-NCR, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Mumbai Metropolitan Region and Pune -- maintained their dominance, accounting for 72 per cent of land purchases. —*PTI*

INTERNET ACCESS TO RURAL AREAS

'Starlink poses limited threat to Indian telcos'

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

PHOTO: X

Starlink's satellite broadband services are unlikely to pose a major threat to Indian telecom giants Jio and Bharti Airtel, as their home broadband plans offer better pricing, higher speeds, and unlimited data, according to JM Financial report.

Instead, Starlink's service is expected to complement telcos' existing networks, helping to expand high-speed internet access to remote and rural areas.

Globally, satellite internet plans from Starlink and other satcom companies range between USD 10-USD 500 per month, with additional one-time hardware costs of USD 250-USD 380.

In contrast, Indian telecom companies offer home broadband plans starting at just USD 5-USD 7 per month, with premium plans providing 1 Gbps speed and access to streaming services for around USD 47 per month. Additionally, Starlink's plans come with data caps, whereas Jio and Bharti provide unlimited data.

Starlink's higher costs and speed limitations make it less competitive for urban users. This reinforces its role in serving rural and underserved regions rather than competing directly with Jio and Bharti's Fiber and AirFiber broadband services. Despite this, industry experts believe direct-to-cell satellite broadband is unlikely to disrupt India's wireless market due to several factors. Firstly, the technology still faces technical challenges, such as difficulties in maintaining reliable smartphone connectivity due to power and antenna limitations. Secondly, Starlink depends on telecom providers for access to 4G/LTE spectrum, making it reliant on existing networks. Lastly, satellite internet generally delivers slower and less reliable performance compared to fiber or traditional wireless services. —*ANI*

Defence sector set for major growth amid global shifts

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

India's defence sector is poised for substantial growth amid global shifts according to a report by Nuvama.

Defence exports are expected to reach Rs 203 billion in FY25, with a government target of Rs 500 billion by FY29.

European defence orders could begin flowing as early as the first half of FY26, marking a major milestone for the sector. Given Europe's manufacturing constraints, Indian defence companies are well-positioned to capitalize on rising export opportunities.

On the domestic front, India is set for a substantial defence push. The government has announced plans to place Rs 1.5 trillion worth of large-scale defence orders by March 2025.

This move, aimed at addressing slow ordering momentum in FY25, is expected to provide a significant boost to defence stocks. The US decision to reduce military aid to Ukraine has exposed NATO's heavy reliance on American defence funding. Historically, the US has contributed around 70 per cent of NATO's total defence expenditure. With the Pentagon proposing USD 50 billion in annual cuts, European nations are under pressure to enhance their own defence capabilities. —*ANI*

Rookie Avani and Pranavi cut Aus Women's Classic

COFFS HARBOUR, 15 MARCH

Rookie Avani Prashanth and Pranavi Urs cut the weather-hit Australian Women's Classic, the more experienced Diksha Dagar fell short. Avani, playing her maiden season, added even par 70 to her first round of 72 and was 2-over for 36 holes, lying tied 40th. Pranavi Urs (73-71) cut the line as Top-60, and ties will play the final round. Pranavi is tied 60th. Diksha Dagar, a two-time LET winner, carded 74-73 and missed the cu, which fell at 4-over. Sarah Kemp, who injured herself seriously in a freak golf cart accident and broke her tibia and fibula eight months ago, made a sensational comeback with a 62 (-8) and moved into a 2-shot lead with one round to go.Avani bogeyed twice on the front nine on the third and the ninth but staged a good comeback on the back nine with birdies on the 11th and 17th. Pranavi, winner of her home Tour's Hero Order of Merit, had three birdies against four bogeys.The 39-year-old, Kemp, who was out of action since August, is back from surgery and rallied with a round that had one bogey and nine birdies.—*PTI*

Rohit could continue as Test captain

Final decision is by BCCI during mid-IPL

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

The Champions Trophy triumph has added to the aura of Rohit Sharma, and it won't be a surprise if he continues as Test captain and travels to England as leader of the pack even as the selectors are yet to make a decision on the tour, starting 20 June.

Rohit was under pressure to perform in Dubai, especially after a 1-3 series defeat in Australia accentuated his poor form.The triumphant run in Dubai has certainly given the skipper breathing space and elbow room. But the question remains if the national selection committee will consider success in ODI format while deciding on more challenging Testsformat, where the returns have been modest of late. The team suffered six hard-to-digest defeats in the last WTC cycle.The new cycle for India will begin with the England series, where the first Test will be played at the Leeds."Technically, Rohit remains the Test captain. He voluntarily benched himself from the last Test in Sydney, where he explained that a team can't carry on with multiple out-of-form batters. Also, Rohit never said he doesn't want to play Tests," a BCCI source told PTI on the condition of anonymity. However, he added that the national selection committee hasn't yet decided on the England series. —*PTI*

Reddy set to join SRH

All-rounder Nitish Kumar Reddy is all set to join Sunrisers Hyderabad after recuperating from a side strain that kept him on the sidelines since January. PTI has learned that Nitish completed all the fitness test routines, including the yo-yo test, at the BCCI Centre of Excellence here, and the physios have given him the go-ahead. The 21-year-old Andhra cricketer's last appearance for India was during the first T20I against England at the Eden Gardens on 22 January, but he did not bat or bowl in that match.

Andreeva to face Sabalenka in Indian Wells finals

INDIAN WELLS, 15 MARCH

Aryna Sabalenka and Rising Russian star Mirra Andreeva PHOTO: X

Rising Russian star Mirra Andreeva became the first 17-year-old player to reach the women's final at Indian Wells since 2001 after overcoming defending champion Iga Swiatek in the last four.

She beat the world number two for the second time in as many tournaments, after knocking her out at the quarter-final stage in Dubai in February on her way to becoming the youngest winner of a WTA 1000 tournament.

Andreeva extended her winning streak to 11 matches as she bounced back from losing a one-sided second set to beat the experienced Pole 7-6 (7-1) 1-6 6-3.

She will face top seed Aryna Sabalenka in the final after the Belarusian avenged her defeat by American Madison Keys at the Australian Open in brutal fashion to win 6-0 6-1.

"I feel that I was dealing with the nerves and the pressure pretty good, so I just feel proud of myself," said ninth seed Andreeva on her recovery in the final set.

"After she literally killed me in the second set, I was just 'well, OK, might just try to fight'. There is not much I could do about it. She was playing amazing.

And I just kind of decided to grind and fight for every point. It doesn't matter how I put the ball in. But I have to put it in.

So I just try to do everything and in the end, it was not too bad.

Andreeva is the youngest woman to reach the Indian Wells final since Kim Clijsters, who lost to Serena Williams in 2001.

She will face another big test in world number one Sabalenka, who took just 51 minutes to dismiss fifth seed Keys. It was a repeat of their Australian Open final, which Keys won 6-3 2-6 7-5 to end Sabalenka's hopes of a third consecutive title in Melbourne.

"That Australian Open match was really heartbreaking for me, and I really needed some time to recover after that," said Sabalenka.

Aryna Sabalenka Crushes Australian Open Champion Madison Keys, Enters Indian Wells Final

World number one Aryna Sabalenka overwhelmed Madison Keys 6-0, 6-1 to reach the Indian Wells WTA 1000 final on Friday, avenging her loss to the fifth-ranked American in the Australian Open final.—*PTI*

PHOTO: X

Injured Neymar to miss WC qualifier against Argentina

RIO DE JANEIRO, 15 MARCH

FNeymar was ruled out by Brazil for the World Cup qualifiers against Colombia and Argentina this month. Neymar, goalkeeper Ederson, and defender Danilo were not fit to play for unspecified reasons, coach Dorival Júnior said in a video published by the Brazil Football Confederation. The 33-year-old striker, who rejoined Santos in January, played his latest match on 2 March and was substituted for an apparent left thigh injury. He sat out the Sao Paulo state championship semifinal against Corinthians a few days later.Real Madrid striker Endrick replaced Neymar in the squad. Ederson's substitute was Lyon's Lucas Perri, while Flamengo defender Danilo was replaced by his club teammate Alex Sandro, also a Brazil veteran.—*PTI*

Azteca Stadium has changed its name ahead of WC

MEXICO CITY, 15 MARCH

The Azteca Stadium has been renamed Banorte Stadium before it hosts its third men's World Cup next year. Latin America's largest soccer stadium, with 87,500 seats, has taken the name of one of Mexico's leading banks, stadium owner Ollamani said on Friday. Naming rights to the stadium were part of Banorte's deal to loan 2.1 billion pesos ($105 million) to be repaid over 12 years, according to Ollamani's filing with the Mexican Stock Exchange. "With them (Banorte), we will modernize this iconic stadium—*PTI*

Indian athletes continue to shine in Winter Games

SYDNEY, 30 OCT

India's impressive run at the Special Olympics Winter Games continued on day three and four, with the athletes adding as many as 15 more medals to the country's tally in Turin, Italy. India's total medal count has now risen to 24, building on the nine medals secured in the earlier events. In alpine skiing, Deepak Thakur and Giridhar displayed exceptional skills to clinch gold medals in the Intermediate Super G M04 and M05 categories, respectively, while Abhishek Kumar secured a silver in the Novice Super G M01 category. Radha Devi also delivered a stellar performance, earning a silver medal in the Intermediate Super G F03 event.—*PTI*

IPL HAS A ROLE

Virat Kohli on cricket in LA 2028

BENGALURU, 15 MARCH

Ace batter Virat Kohli was thrilled by the inclusion of cricket in the Los Angeles Olympics 2028 and said the Indian Premier League has played a massive role in giving the sport a place in the global sporting extravaganza.

Cricket will return to the hallowed arena of the Olympics for the first time since the 1900 Games in Paris.

"To be an Olympic champion would be a magnificent feeling. The IPL has played a massive role in that as well. Now, it has gotten us to a stage where it's part of the Olympics. It's a great opportunity for some of our guys," Kohli said in the RCB Innovation Lab talk show here on Saturday, moderated by former England cricketer Isa Guha. "The athletes will be able to taste it. First of its kind. And I'm sure we'll be somewhere close to that medal. Both men and women play side by side as well," he added. By 2028, it is unlikely that Kohli, by then around 40, would be playing the game, but he gave a thought of playing in the Olympics, but only in jest. "For the Olympics, I don't know, maybe, if we are playing for the gold medal. I just might sneak in for one game, get a medal, and come back home. But I think it's a great thing for the sport, overall," Kohli said amidst peals of laughter. —*PTI*

CHHETRI RETURNS FROM RETIREMENT

India aims to beat Maldives and Bangladesh with clean sheets

SHILLONG, 15 MARCH

It will be easier said than done, but senior defender Sandesh Jhingan on Saturday said that the Indian football team's target is to beat Maldives and Bangladesh without conceding any goal in the upcoming international matches here.

"Because it was a special situation, I spoke with the AIFF and Bengaluru FC before I called him. I spoke with Sunil and explained to him what I wanted from him," Marquez said.

"It doesn't matter if he's 40. The national team needs players who are in good form," the Spaniard said.

India host Maldives in an international friendly on 19 March, before taking on a tricky Bangladesh on 25 March in their opening match of the 2027 AFC Asian Cup qualifying third round match.

Sunil Chhetri

Both the matches will be held at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium here as the Meghalaya capital is hosting its first international games.

The match against Maldives on March 19 will also mark the return of talismanic Sunil Chhetri from international retirement."Our main aim is to get the result in the Bangladesh match, as that would give us a good start in the Asian Cup Qualifiers, and I think the 10-day training ahead of that, along with the friendly against Maldives, will greatly help us prepare for it," Jhingan said."Our target is two clean sheet victories," the 31-year-old was quoted as saying in an AIFF release. —*PTI*

Keita Nakajima

STRONG FIELD AWAITS INDIAN OPEN FROM 27 MARCH

GURUGRAM, 15 MARCH

Defending champion Keita Nakajima will lead a strong field at the Hero Indian Open with as many as 16 winners from the last and current season of the DP World Tour (DPWT) featuring in the tournament.

The event, starting March 27, will have a dozen winners from the 2024 DPWT schedule and they will be joined by the four champions from the 2025 schedule at the DLF Golf and Country Club here.

The field includes Germany's Marcel Siem, the tournament winner from 2023, who won another title in 2024.

DLF Golf and Country Club will host the event for the seventh time.The 24-year-old Nakajima, a former Asia-Pacific Amateur champion, was the World No. 1 amateur for a record total of 87 weeks between November 2020 and September 2022.

In 2023, Nakajima won three titles on the Japan Tour and went on to top the Japan Tour Order of Merit, by virtue of which he earned a card to the DPWT 2024 season.

In his very first full season on DPWT, Nakajima won the Indian Open after beating the trio of India's Veer Ahlawat, Sweden's Sebastian Soderberg, and American Johannes Veerman.

The three runner-ups are all coming back to have a shot at one of the iconic events of the region.Nakajima is also hoping to emulate a fellow Japanese player, Kenji Hosoishi, who became the first player to win the India Open title back-to-back in 1967 and 1968. Since then, Jyoti Randhawa (2006 and 2007) and SSP Chawrasia (2016 and 2017) have also achieved the feat. Nakajima is not the only former World No. 1 amateur in the field who has had success in India. —*PTI*

Miretti scores as Genoa beats Lecce

GENOA, 15 MARCH

A first-half double from Fabio Miretti, his first brace as a professional, gave Genoa a 2-1 win over Lecce in Serie A on Friday.

The midfielder scored two exceptional goals to lift 12th-placed Genoa to equal on points with Torino, which has a game in hand.

The first was a volley taken over his shoulder and from a tight angle after 16 minutes. The second, in first-half stoppage time, came when he took an excellent pass from Rusian Malinovskyi and spun inside the box before firing home.

Nikola Krstovic pulled a goal back from the spot for Lecce midway through the second half, but Lecce remained 16th, just two points ahead of the relegation zone.

The southern club is winless since the last day of January, a run dating back six games. —*PTI*

Harmanpreet wins men's HI Player of the Year award

NEW DELHI, 15 MARCH

Kiren Rijiju presents an award to P Shreejesh PHOTO:PTI

India captain Harmanpreet Singh and senior goalkeeper Savita Punia won the Hockey India Balbir Singh Senior Player of the Year award in the men's and women's categories, respectively.

Harmanpreet led India to their second consecutive bronze medal at the 2024 Paris Olympics. He was also a part of the Tokyo Games bronze medal-winning side.

Savita was a member of the Indian team that came agonisingly close to winning a bronze at the Tokyo Olympics. The team had lost the third-place match to Great Britain.

It was a double celebration for Savita, as she also won the Hockey India Baljit Singh Goalkeeper of the Year award for 2024. "I am honoured to receive the awards, but it wouldn't have been possible without my teammates. I am grateful for the recognition, and it will continue to motivate me towards my game," Savita said in a video message. This was the third time that Savita won the award.

"This award means a lot, it is a motivation for youngsters to work hard towards their goals and achieve success in life. It's a special day for all of us," Harmanpreet said.

The seventh Hockey India Annual Awards were held to commemorate 100 years of Indian hockey and also to celebrate the country's World Cup win in 1975 in Kuala Lumpur. —*PTI*

Gokulam Kerala hand Odisha FC 3-1 defeat

BHUBANESWAR, 15 MARCH

PHOTO: PTI

Gokulam Kerala remained in the hunt for the Indian Women's League 2024-25 title as they beat defending champions Odisha FC 3-1 at the Kalinga Stadium here on Saturday.

The Malabarians led 2-0 at the break.Fazila Ikwaput (42', 59') increased her goals tally to 15, scoring two against Odisha, while Juggernauts' striker Pyari Xaxa (32') scored an own goal. Substitute Neha (50') scored for the hosts.

After starting off the season with two draws, Gokulam Kerala have pulled themselves up marvellously, winning six matches on the trot, and are currently placed at the top of the table with 20 points from eight matches.While East Bengal are two points behind them, they have played a match less. Odisha, on the other hand, are third, with 11 points from eight outings.

The Malabarians were at their hosts' throats from the start, and goalkeeper Shreya Hooda had to pull off a couple of fine saves to keep her side level in the opening exchanges.

She, however, got injured closer to the half-hour mark, and had to be replaced by Anshika, who's first duty was to pull off a save at full stretch off a Fazila free-kick from close range. —*PTI*

AUSTRALIAN GP QUALIFIERS

Norris claims pole position with Hamilton

MELBOURNE, 15 MARCH

Lando Norris set a searing final qualifying lap to secure pole position

PHOTO: X

McLaren locked up the front row in Melbourne for Sunday's Australian Grand Prix, having dominated its rivals, including Red Bull, Mercedes, and Ferrari, whose drivers, Charles Leclerc and Lewis Hamilton, will start from seventh and eighth on the grid.

Lando Norris set a searing final qualifying lap to secure pole position, his first at Melbourne's Albert Park and milestone 10th overall, in front of his teammate Oscar Piastri and a record Saturday crowd of 136,347 at Albert Park. "Not a bad way to start the year, thanks everyone," Norris said on his team radio shortly after the qualifying session ended ahead of Sunday's opening race of the Formula 1 season.

Hamilton was circumspect about his qualifying finish.

"It isn't quite where we wanted to be, but overall, I'm satisfied with the progress we have made over the past two days," Hamilton said. "We didn't expect to be eight- or nine-tenths (of a second) behind pole, but given this is a weekend of firsts for me, I didn't underestimate how steep the learning curve would be."

PHOTO: X

Norris went into Q3 on the back foot after his first lap was deleted for a track limit infringement at turn four, where he put all four wheels off the track. —*PTI*

Marc on top in Argentina MotoGP Practice

PARIS, 15 MARCH

Six-time world champion Marc Marquez was fastest in practice for the Argentina MotoGP on Friday, continuing the blistering form that saw him win the season-opener in Thailand. The Spanish star, a three-time winner in Argentina, clocked a new lap record of 1min 37.295sec on his factory Ducati on a drying track at Termas de Rio Hondo, the small spa town situated 1,100km northwest of Buenos Aires. Just as they had done in Thailand, Ducati again dominated with Fabio Di Giannantonio and Marquez's younger brother Alex filling out the top three. Alex Marquez, who was second in the season-opener two weeks ago, took pole in Argentina when the track last staged a MotoGP in 2023. He went on to finish third that weekend in another Ducati podium sweep. "I immediately felt comfortable. We put more work on the bike compared to Thailand, as it was a long time since I last rode at this track, and it was also my first time here on a Ducati," said Marc Marquez. —*PTI*